"THE 16 CLUB"—An Air Novelette—Jackson V. Scholz

PICAROON—Gordon MacCreagh - - DIAMOND DOUBLE CROSS—W. Heuman

Short Stories

August 25th

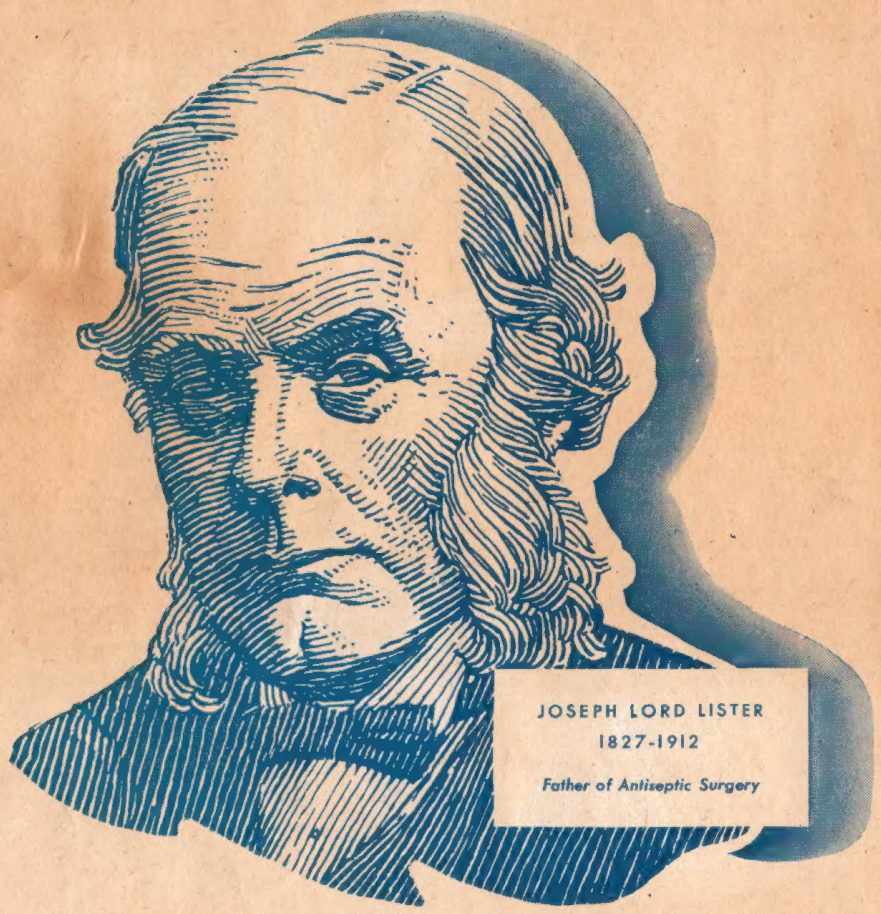
Twice A Month

25c

"Fate and Some Fools"

a HASHKNIFE story by

W. C. TUTTLE



N INSTRUMENT IN THE HANDS OF GOD . . .

s an instrument in God's hands, Lister has ought more for the relief of suffering, for the urity of life, for the prevention of anxiety, and the promotion of happiness, than any one man o has ever trod this earth." So spoke one of ter's associates, a doctor of international fame.

LMOST alone and single-handed this great, good man, the "father of antiseptic surgery," ught health and life out of a morass of suffer- nd death.

it for his unshakeable faith in a "fantastic" ry, initiated by the immortal Pasteur, and reless efforts to prove its truth in the face of ion and mockery, the fatalities of today, civilian and military, might reach appalling portions.

or it was Lister's fierce conviction that fatal ctions were caused, not by atmospheric changes or mysterious conditions set up by the wound itself, but by tiny germs carried by the air into the wound. The world laughed at him.

And it was Lister, using the crudest kind of carbolic acid as an antiseptic, who proved that by killing or controlling these germs in sufficient numbers at every stage—*before, during and after an operation*—Death could often be averted.

Though all England rang with his fame as a surgeon, it was years before hostile critics accepted his practical life-giving methods, the simple essence of which was absolute cleanliness.

It was for this benefactor of mankind that Listerine Antiseptic was named. Today, as in its early years, it is recognized as a dependable and delightful first-aid, providing rapid germ-killing action with complete safety.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., *St. Louis, Mo.*

FOR COUNTLESS LITTLE EMERGENCIES **LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC**

"THIS WISDOM MUST DIE!"

Truths That Have Been Denied Struggling Humanity

FOR every word that has left the lips of bishops or statesmen to enlighten man, a thousand have been withheld. For every book publicly exposed to the inquiring mind, one hundred more have been suppressed—*damned to oblivion*. Each year of progress has been wilfully delayed centuries. Wisdom has had to filter through biased, secret sessions or ecclesiastical council meetings, where high dignitaries of state and church alone proclaimed what man should know.

Are you prepared to demand the hidden facts of life? Will you continue to believe that you are not capable of weighing the worth of knowledge that concerns your personal freedom and happiness? Realize that much that can make your life more *understandable* and *livable* has been left unexplained or intentionally destroyed. At first by word of mouth only, and *now* by private discourses, are *revealed* those truths which secret brotherhoods preserved in ancient temples and hidden sanctuaries, from those who sought to selfishly deprive humanity of them.

THIS *free* BOOK OF EXPLANATION

Let the Rosicrucians, one of these ancient brotherhoods of learning, tell you about these amazing truths, and explain how you, too, like thousands of others, may now use them to enjoy the fullness of life. The Rosicrucians, (not a religious organization) invite you to use the coupon opposite and receive the FREE copy of the fascinating, Sealed Book, with its startling tale of *self help*.

The ROSICRUCIANS (AMORC)
SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U. S. A.

Scribe T. J. R
THE ROSICRUCIANS (AMORC)
Rosicrucian Park, San Jose, California, U.S.A.

Please send me your FREE Sealed Book. I am sincerely interested in learning how I may receive these long-concealed facts of life.

Name.....

Address.....

ACTION, ADVENTURE, MYSTERY

Short

Every author's finest and

CONTENTS

THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE 6

FATE AND SOME FOOLS
(A Long Novelette) **W. C. Tuttle** 8
One Thing—a Bullet Never Stops to Look at a Badge. So Hashknife and Sleepy Could Manage to Be of Some Use to a Harassed Sheriff

PICAROON **Gordon MacCreagh** 33
"No Tickee, No Washee." It Even Applies to War Machines. And One Smooth Double Cross Is as Many as Any but a Fool Will Chance

DEATH IN STOCK **William G. Bogart** 45
For Three Days Fog Had Rolled in Over Cape Cod—Damp and Gray and Thick. And On the Third Day, There Was a Murder

BARB WIRE (Conclusion) **W. Ryerson Johnson** 52
Progress Never Comes Easy, Progress Comes Violent —With Plenty of Killing

CURIODDITIES **Irwin J. Weill** 79

THE BOOMER **Francis Gott** 80
Things go Pretty Dizzily In the Shipyards These Days, and, for Instance, How Must a Cockroach Feel Under the Raised Heel of a Man?

WILDERNESS WILES **George Armin Shaftel** 87
The U. S. Deputy Marshal Got to Know the Bear Facts of a Case of Bush Fever

SHORT STORIES issued semi-monthly by SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City 20, N. Y., and entered as second class matter, November 24, 1937, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE in the United States, American Possessions, Mexico and South America, $5.00 per year; to Canada, $6.50; and to all other countries, $6.60. Price payable in advance. August 25, 1944. Vol. CLXXXVIII, No. 4. Whole Number 928.

WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer.*
M. DELANEY, *Secretary.*

D. McILWRAITH, *Editor.*
LAMONT BUCHANAN, *Associate Editor.*

BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH

Stories

latest stories—no reprints

AUGUST 25th, 1944

THE SIXTEEN CLUB
(A Novelette) **Jackson V. Scholz** 92
Trying to Mix Attack Tactics with Escape Tactics. Not Good Sense Anyway; but the Pilot Had Two Fights on His Hands—One with the Japs and One with Home Grown Superstitions

BOOLSFIGHT BEEZNESS **S. Omar Barker** 107
"An' While You Two Half-cocked Idots Been Tourin' the Bull-Fight Circuit, Somebody's Been Hair-Brandin' an' Sleeperin' My Calves All Over the Damn Range!"

PLANE FACTS **Jim Ray** 115

DIAMOND DOUBLE CROSS
(A Novelette) **William Heuman** 116
In the Dog Days of August a Penant Hangs on a Single Pitch, Or a Miscue in the Infield

NO KIDDING **Patrick O'Keeffe** 132
He Was a Great Kidder, the Chief Steward. And Now the North Atlantic War Time Run Seemingly Offered Him a Unique Opportunity to Indulge His Wit

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER **Pete Kuhlhoff** 141

COVER—Pete Kuhlhoff

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

Title registered in U. S. Patent Office PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

The entire contents of this magazine is protected by copyright and must not be reprinted. Copyright, 1944, by SHORT STORIES, INC.

LAW
for Business SUCCESS

Keen business men everywhere recognize one formula. It consists of three words—

"LAW FOR SUCCESS"

And it isn't necessary to practice law to get this success. In fact, probably most of the men who study law today have no idea of taking the bar examination or becoming lawyers—they want law training to give them mastery of men and situations in business. You know that—

(1)—the man with legal training is a leader.

(2)—legal training keens your mind—clears away the problems that stump the ordinary fellow.

(3)—knowledge of law simplifies the complications of executive work.

(4)—many top executive places are filled by men who have studied law.

No matter whether you're in a big corporation or a small business—in a great city or a little town—a practical knowledge of law cannot fail to be of real and vital help to you in making a more successful career.

At home—in spare time—you can acquire legal training—properly equip yourself—either for the degree of LL.B. or for greater success in business, whichever you prefer.

Law Training—at Home —In Your Spare Time

There is no investment in the world likely to pay a higher return than an investment in law training.

In otherwise wasted hours—at home—nights—with LaSalle guiding you—working with you—step by step—you can acquire sound legal training.

LaSalle offers either a full law course leading to LL.B. or a shorter business law training—whichever you prefer. All text material including valuable 14-volume Law Library. Comprises the most effective features of modern law instruction. Cost very low—terms mighty easy.

Send today for our valuable 48-page "Law Training for Leadership." It is free and enables you to judge adequately for yourself. Don't put it off—every day counts.

LaSalle EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
A Correspondence Institution
Dept. 875-LR Chicago 15

☐ Law Degree of LL.B. I would like to have full information about your law training, together with copy of "Law Training for Leadership," without obligation.

Other LaSalle Opportunities: LaSalle opens the way to success in every important phase of business. If more interested in one of the fields indicated below, check and mail now.

- ☐ Commercial Law
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Higher Accountancy
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business English
- ☐ Industrial Management
- ☐ Effective Speaking

Name.....

Address.....City.....

"YOU ARE UNDER ARREST"

There's a Thrill in Bringing a Crook to Justice Through Scientific
CRIME DETECTION

I have taught thousands of men and women this exciting, profitable, pleasant profession. Let me teach you, too, *in your own home.* Prepare yourself in your leisure time to fill a responsible, steady, well-paid position in a very short time and at very small cost. What others have done you, too, can do.

53% of all American Bureaus of Identification

Be A FINGER PRINT Expert

Employ I.A.S. students or graduates. "I will teach you Finger Print Identification—Firearms Identification—Police Photography—and Secret Service." That's what I told the men who now handle jobs in Identification Bureaus throughout the nation.

And now I repeat, THIS time to YOU . . . Just give me a chance and I'll train you at home to fill an important position in the fascinating field of scientific crime detection. It is not expensive or difficult to learn. Now is the time to start. War conditions make it necessary to guard against sabotage by enemy aliens. Finger Print identification is one of the recognized means of uncovering them. The need of more Finger Print experts is evident. Fit yourself now to help win the war and later on to hold down a fine job as a recognized expert in Crime Detection.

FREE! "BLUE BOOK OF CRIME" It's a thriller, filled from cover to cover with exciting information on scientific crime detection. It tells about some of the most interesting crimes of modern times, and how the criminals were brought to justice through the very methods which you are taught at I.A.S. The book will tell you, too, how at a cost so low you shouldn't even think of it, you can get started on this important work without delay. Don't wait. Clip the coupon and send it along today.

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE
Dept. 156-C, 1920 Sunnyside Ave . Chicago 40, Ill.

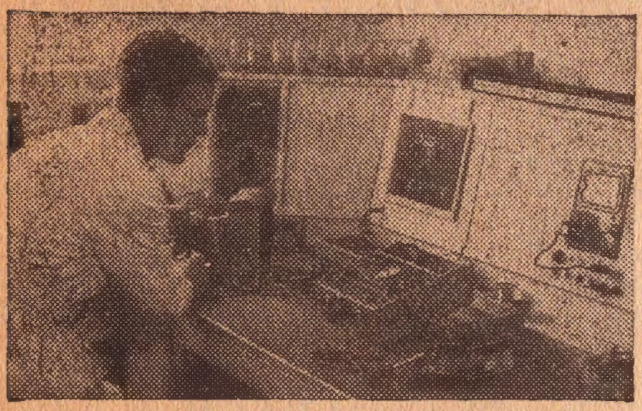
CLIP AND MAIL COUPON NOW

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE, 1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 156C, Chicago 40, Ill.

Gentlemen: Without obligation, send me the "Blue Book of Crime," and complete list of Identification Bureaus employing your students or graduates, together with your low prices and Easy Terms Offer. (Literature will be sent ONLY to persons stating their age.)

Name .....
Address .....
..... Age.....

GET INTO RADIO



You profit by a fascinating career in Radio, Radionics, Electronics, Television.

ELECTRONICS TELEVISION *Now!*

Shortages in trained, skilled men run into the hundreds of thousands. One of the biggest fields is RADIO, with its many fascinating branches. Wartime demands for Radio men are tremendous and will continue UNABATED after the war. That's important to you. You want training in a field that will continue to advance. National Schools offers you a time-tested method of Home Training which has helped thousands of men to more pay, and unlimited opportunity in the growing RADIO industry.

Shop Method Home Training

by a Long Established Resident School

Get Ready For Your Opportunity . . . It's Here! Radio technical men are needed everywhere; afield in action, and at home in industry! Trained men are needed in the Army, Navy and Air and Signal Corps, Government Defense Service and Civilian fields. Now, in answer to repeated demands for Trained Radio Technicians, National Schools has extended its famous Shop Methods so you can qualify right at home. You can quickly prepare to be of greatest service to your country and yourself. Yes, right at home, in your spare time. National's time-tested plan of Home Training will definitely establish you, in a short time, so you can hold a good job in this fascinating field. Furthermore, you become equipped for an ever bigger career in the years of reconstruction after war.

TRAIN DURING MILITARY SERVICE

Prepare for Radio Service in Army and Navy. In U. S. Gov't service you install, operate and maintain most technical equipment such as secret ultra-high frequency apparatus to locate airplanes, submarines, etc. Get promotion in rank and increased pay almost from the start.

Command Any Of These Jobs

Radio Expert
Electronics Engineer
Radio Broadcasting
Studio Technician
Television Technician
Aviation Radio
Ship & Harbor Radio
Business of Your Own
137 Different Types of Jobs to Choose From

TREMENDOUS POST WAR DEMAND

NO PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE NEEDED!

Radio is only one of the courses you receive when you become a National Student. Electronics is brand new and open to every trained radio man. After this war it will produce new marvels that will be needed and used in every home. General Electric, Westinghouse and all great manufacturers have many new electronic inventions ready to market. National men, because of their knowledge and training in Electronics, will be in on the ground floor and among the first to cash in.

Television is a **big new opportunity.** National men will have the "know how" to merit jobs in this great industry.

RADIO EQUIPMENT INCLUDED

You work with the finest equipment and materials furnished by us at no extra charge.

DUPLICATE THE SUCCESS OF THESE GRADUATES

"National Schools has done wonderful work for the man who wants to get ahead in life. Your trained man can get a job at a much higher salary"—O. K. Ivey, Washington, D. C.

"Your schooling helped me obtain a swell job. Now, in the navy, I am following the profession I learned at National. It will help my chances for rapid advancement."—H. Schroeder, U. S. Navy.

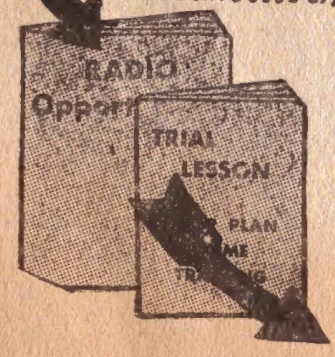
NATIONAL SCHOOLS

LOS ANGELES 37, CALIFORNIA
EST. 1905

FREE LESSON

And OPPORTUNITY BOOK . . .

To prove that you can easily learn radio at home by National's famous "Shop Method" home training, we will send this SAMPLE LESSON without cost or obligation. With it, we will send you a big 36-page book, "Your Future in Radio, Television and Electronics." Mail the coupon NOW.



MAIL OPPORTUNITY COUPON FOR QUICK ACTION

National Schools, Dept. 8NSR
4000 S. Figueroa Street
Los Angeles 37, Calif.

Mail in envelope or paste on penny postal

Please rush me, FREE and without any obligation on my part, Sample Lesson in Radio, Television and Electronics and full details of your "Shop Method" of home training. No salesman will call.

NAME ..... AGE.....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE.....

Include your zone number

The Story Tellers' Circle

Chronicle of the West

W. RYERSON JOHNSON'S fine novel "Barb Wire" concluded in this issue, is a rather neat chronicle (we thought) as well as good fiction of an important period in a great section of this country: the West. It reminds us, too, that in these United States today "sectionalism" is a source of pride, not of bitter argument!

"With world shattering events taking most of our attention it is hard to realize that for a period of many years the most-talked-of question throughout our whole vast west and middle west was—fencing!

"Those were the days when civilization, as we knew it, had been dammed up at the edge of the treeless plains, and was just beginning to break its bounds and dribble westward from the Mississippi Valley.

"Settlers found that to survive on the plains they must throw overboard much of the homely lore developed in a forested country. They had, in fact, to develop a whole new technique of living.

"They had always taken the blessing of trees pretty much for granted. Or maybe they didn't consider them a blessing. In many ways they were a curse, because before the land could be cultivated and planted to food crops years of hard work were required to get rid of the trees that blanketed so much of eastern America.

"But here were the grassy plains, rich land that needed only the turn of a plow to prepare it in one season for planting. A settlers' paradise! Until the settler stopped to consider that in addition to providing obstructions to his plow, the trees of the East had provided logs and lumber for home building, fuel for fires, protection from flood and from sun—and from Indians. Trees had also supplied food—and fences.

"On the plains a man had to work out substitutes for what the trees had so bountifully provided, or else freight these timber products at great toil and expense from the East. This simple fact delayed the development of the West for years.

"Things shook down until it became pretty generally recognized that before the West could grow it needed four things: an adequate means of transportation, more water, improved weapons—and a new kind of fence.

"River and canal traffic had taken care of the East until the railroads came along. But in a great part of the West there wasn't enough water to take a drink, let alone to float a boat on. So the railroads had to be pushed across the plains before settlers and supplies in any great number could be brought in.

"But even before the advent of the railroads, the few hardy ones who had wagon-rolled in, had to have new weapons before they could survive. In the East a long rifle or a single-shot pistol was all right for fighting Indians, because there was always a tree to hide behind while a man reloaded. And if the fight went against him he could use the trees for concealment while he crept away to live to fight another time.

"But on the plains where there might be no shelter bigger than a man's hat for a hundred miles in every direction, a man with a single-shot gun was no match for an Indian who could carry a hundred arrows, who could shoot them fast enough to keep one in the air at all times, and who could shoot with such force as to drive the arrow all the way through the body of a buffalo.

"The West needed a new gun, and it got it—Colonel Colt's six-shooter!

"All right, weapons and transportation the West had now. It needed another thing—water. The deep well and the windmill were developed to supply it. Before the windmill was introduced on the plains both ranching and farming was restricted to the narrow strips along active river beds. But with the windmill it became economically profitable to run cattle in country that had heretofore been considered a desert, and to extend farming by irrigation.

"Only one thing more the West needed now to make her roar—fencing. Cows and corn could not develop side by side without

proper fences to separate them, and stock breeding could not be introduced to build up the scrubby native cattle.

"Everything in the West was done on a giant scale. Fence was needed, not by the rod, but by the hundreds of miles. It was out of the question to transport enough rails and boards from the East.

"Even when brought in wholesale by railroad the cost of the fencing would still be greater than the value of the stuff it enclosed.

"Mud fences were built in a few localities, and in some places rock—where there was any loose rock. But for a while the most popular type of fencing was hedge. Experimental-minded ranchers and farmers tried everything with thorns. In the newspapers of the day the controversy raged as to which was the proper hedge. Cherokee rose, mesquite, Shanghai, bloomer, osage orange, even prickley pear—all had their advocates.

"But the one thing they all seemed agreed upon was that some kind of *hedge* was the proper fence. Hedge, they said, was here to stay. A new profession appeared, that of the hedge grower. Osage orange seed was quoted on the produce markets of the Middle West. There was a boom market in it. Everybody and his aunt was taking a flier in osage orange, with the seed fluctuating from around five dollars a bushel to eighty dollars.

"But from the plains country came increasing dissent. Hedge took too long to grow, it shaded too much ground, it was too much trouble to maintain. . . . A few radicals tried smooth wire. But though smooth wire was all right to send telegrams on, they found it didn't make a good fence. The cows had no respect for it; they pushed right through it.

"All at once, it seemed a lot of people got the idea of putting thorns on the wire . . . and then they had *barb wire,* which sounded the death knell of the open range, but left the West free to grow in a dozen other directions.

"Soon there wasn't another professional hedge grower in the country.

"It is interesting to note that for one reason or another most of the earlier experimenting with various types of barbed wire was carried on in northern Illinois. Some thirty out of the first forty-five patents were made by men living in that region."

W. Ryerson Johnson

Most-Asked Question

WILLIAM G. BOGART undertakes to answer the question readers put to writers most often. He admits usually he can't always come up with an explanation, but in the case of "Death In Stock"—well, let's give Bill Bogart the floor.

"Readers often ask writers: 'Where do you get all your ideas?' To show you how one writer's mind (or should we call it imagination?) works, here's a brief history of 'Death In Stock.'

"Some time ago an actor-writer friend of mine spent a season near Erie, Pennsylvania, in a summer stock company. He acted, directed and helped wash the dishes. He often described to me the trials and tribulations of such a group. (Later, this chap went on to appear in the play 'Janie' and to also act as its assistant stage manager in New York City.)

"So here I had my characters and my background. The thought simmered for months. One foggy night on the beach at Westport, Connecticut, I thought, 'Boy, what a swell background for murder!'

"Bingo! I'd put my little group of players there at the beach and let them take it on from there.

"As with many stories, however, it was not written right then and there. I had to move to Chicago before the yarn ever got on paper. I'm far from Westport and the smell of salt air and the mystery of a damp foggy night. But I can still hear a foghorn sounding dismally in the night. And I sure miss it!"

William G. Bogart

Well-Known Character Goes on Air

W. C. TUTTLE passes on some interesting news in laconic fashion. We were much more excited than he seems to be when we heard that he has signed an agreement with the National Broadcasting Company to put Hashknife on the radio. He should be on the air very shortly.

We'd be interested in knowing how many of our readers listen in for the program, Hashknife having been such a favorite with them for so many years.

FATE AND SOME FOOLS

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of Many Stories of Hashknife and Sleepy

HASHKNIFE HARTLEY and Sleepy Stevens hunkered beside an old well, lowering their canteen on a lariat-rope to water-level. It was very hot out there, and water was scarce. A canteen is a cranky thing to fill in this manner, but they were very patient. Their two horses were in the shade of an old sycamore on the other side of a tumble-down corral.

Hashknife was several inches over six feet tall, lean and as gaunt as a racing greyhound. Sleepy was short, wide of shoulder, slightly bowed of leg. They were both tanned the color of old leather, their garb consisting of battered sombreros, colorless shirts, faded overalls, which fitted as though they had been poured into them, and high-heel boots.

Both men wore hand-made belts, short holsters, and black-handled Colt .45's. Neither one wore color nor silver. They were just a pair of drifting cowboys, accountable to no one, always seeking what might be found on the other side of a hill.

This welcome well was located on a deserted homestead, where some hoe-man had tried to make a living from an unfriendly

soil, gone broke and moved on. The desert had nearly covered his handiwork now. The little corral had fallen down, except for an occasional post, which leaned drunkenly, the cheap frame shack was sagging at the corners, windows and doors missing. There was the remains of a stable, roofless now,

Like Hummin'-Birds Lookin' for Gee-raniums—That's the Way Hashknife Liked Bad Men to Get Away from There

and a sort of half-shed, half-root-house, which seemed to be intact. At least it had a door.

Sleepy bobbed the canteen, peering into the depths.

"We ort to put a sinker on the danged thing," he said. "If she don't dunk pretty quick, I'll haul her up and lick the outside. Man, I'm sure dry—lookin' down at that water."

"Job had patience," said Hashknife Hartley quietly.

"Yeah? Well, all he had was boils. If he tried to dunk a canteen on the end of a rope—say, I've got an idea! We'll tie a rock to the muzzle-end of the danged thing. That will make her dive, I'll betcha."

Sleepy started to haul up the canteen, when Hashknife said quietly, "Couple riders comin' down that draw. They're in the brush now; yuh can't see 'em."

"Mebbe headin' for water," said Sleepy, as he reached out and got the dripping canteen. "I'll find me a rock big enough now."

"Hold it," whispered Hashknife warningly.

The two riders came out of the brush and drew up in front of the small shack, about a hundred yards away.

"Hashknife, that man is masked!" said Sleepy.

"Yea-a-ah," whispered the tall cowboy. "And the other jasper is tied on his saddle."

"What's goin on?" queried Sleepy. "Looks kinda funny."

The man with the mask untied his prisoner and herded him into the shack. Hashknife and Sleepy relaxed and looked at each other curiously.

"That kinda beats hell a mile," said Sleepy. "That prisoner ain't no native of this country—judgin' from his clothes."

The masked man came outside and shut the door. He took off his mask and proceeded to nail the door shut.

"Well, that's one way to keep 'em," muttered Hashknife dryly.

THE man turned from the nailed door and looked around. Then he stepped quickly to his horse and yanked a rifle from a scabbard on the saddle.

"Oh-oh, he's seen our horses!" said Hashknife. "Hug Mother Earth, pardner; he's goin' to throw a cat-fit in another minute!"

The man crouched near his horse, rifle in hand, as he scanned the landscape, looking for the owners of those two horses. He was big, whiskered, swaying on his haunches, the rifle ready. There were a few tall weeds around the old well, growing up among some discarded planks, which con-

cealed Hashknife and Sleepy to some extent.

Slowly the man straightened up, twisting nervously. Then he saw the two strangers at the well. He fired one quick shot, which went a foot over their heads, and then dived for the shed. Hashknife and Sleepy promptly dived for the cover of the old watering-trough, which was heavy enough to stop any ordinary lead bullet.

The man had a rifle, but the two cowboys only had six-shooters. However, they felt more secure now. Sleepy yawned and put his hat on top of the trough. The next moment it fell off, neatly drilled through the crown, and the bullet smacked into the old stable.

"Be nice, if it rains," said Hashknife dryly.

"Yeah. I've got to get me a new hat one of these days. This'n has commenced to sag pretty badly."

The man behind the shack tried the same thing, but they ignored his old hat. Maybe he thought they were unarmed. Anyway, he tried a peek around the corner, and Hashknife's bullet sent splinters off the old board, chest-high.

"That'll learn him not to peek," grinned Sleepy.

"The right word is *teach,*" said Hashknife.

"All right, all right. But if he keeps that up, he'll get learned. He-ey! I've got a idea. I'll crawl, while you keep him back. Mebbe I can work around to the horses and drop into that dry wash. That way we can smoke him out very easy."

"Keep yore head down," advised Hashknife.

Sleepy crawled fast, until he reached the corner of the old corral, when the man opened up from another corner. The bullets smashed into two old posts above Sleepy's head, and he yelped:

"He-e-ey! Keep him back, will yuh?"

"Why don't yuh shoot at him, Sleepy?"

"Yeah, that's a good idea."

Sleepy risked sudden death, but sent a fusillade of bullets into the corner that drove the man back. Then Sleepy crawled swiftly to the brush and tipped over into the dry wash, followed by a bullet that threw gravel all over him. But Sleepy was safe now. The man was in a bad position. Sleepy could rake the side and back of the shack, while Hashknife covered the front and other side.

"Whee-e-e!" yelled Sleepy "Watch him, pardner!"

The man came out. There wasn't anything else for him to do. And he came with a rush, straight for his horse. He wasn't fighting now; he only had retreat in mind.

He went into that saddle faster than they had ever seen anybody mount, even a trick rider, whirled the frightened animal around, and then went sailing out into space, when the horse doubled up and went down on its head.

The man struck on his belly, jerked to his hands and knees, and got to his feet. He had lost his rifle, but didn't stop to get it. Out past the old house he went, running at top speed, urged on by bullets that were only missing him by inches. Sleepy was running up the dry-wash, trying to keep track of the fleeing man, while Hashknife swept up the discarded rifle and raced for the house.

But the man was gone, disappearing in a heavy cover. Sleepy came back to Hashknife, perspiration running off his stubby nose, a grin on his face.

"We fanned him plenty," he panted. "For a puncher, he's awful fast on his feet. I reckon we ruined his horse."

THEY went to the old shed, where they managed to pry off the door. The prisoner was lying on the floor, tied hand and foot, staring up at them. He was a young man, well-dressed, or, at least, he had been well-dressed, before dirt and mesquite thorns got at him. They took the ropes off him and he sat up, grimacing painfully.

"Well, what next?" he asked hoarsely and rather defiantly.

"We're wonderin' the same thing," said Hashknife. His face broke into one of his peculiar smiles, and the stranger heaved a sigh of relief.

"What happened?" he asked. "What was all the shooting about? I saw splinters fly in there. Where is the man with a mask?"

"He abandoned yuh," grinned Sleepy. "Life sudden-like got awful sweet to him——and he's out yonder some'ers with the birds and the bees. Mebbe he's in Mexico by this time. He shore went away from here,

like a hummin'-bird lookin' for a gee-ranium."

They went outside. The young man saw the dead horse, and said, "That man must have walked away."

"The same kinda action," nodded Sleepy, "but much quicker."

"It is all quite strange," said the young man. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere in Arizona," replied Hashknife. "We don't know the exact spot, my friend. Why did that man bring you here?"

"Why? I—I was hoping you could tell me. I never saw him before, and he wouldn't talk."

"Deaf and dumb?" asked Sleepy curiously.

"Well, he could swear. But he wouldn't answer any questions. I don't know what to do. Where is Dry Forks?"

"Dry Forks?" queried Hashknife. "I've heard of that place. It's in Paint Pot Valley, wherever that is. What do folks call yuh, stranger?"

"My name is Dean Allan Colbert."

"Good! You've just met Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens. I'm Hashknife, Dean."

"I am pleased to have met you. Do you know anybody in Chicago?"

"Is that necessary?" asked Sleepy. "After all, we didn't ask yuh if yuh knew anybody in Arizona."

"No, but I—I—well, I just thought that if you did know somebody, it would—"

"I know what yuh mean," said Hashknife. "You kinda like to know somebody that knew somebody from home."

"Yes, I believe that is it, Mr. Hartley. I've been so confused lately. You see, I came to Oro Grande on the train, and stopped at a hotel. It isn't a very good hotel either, but they said it was the best they had. I was looking over the sights last evening, when I met two men. It was rather dark. One of them asked me if my name was Colbert, and I told him it was.

"They made me go with them and they put me on a horse. I have only been on a horse once before. They tied me on. They said they were a little afraid I might fall off—but that wasn't the reason."

"And you rode all night?" asked Sleepy.

"Yes," said Dean. "There wasn't any roads either."

They led Dean's horse around the old corral to where Hashknife's and Sleepy's horses were tied. Sleepy went back and filled the canteen. They all had a big drink, and he filled it again.

"That rock idea works out fine," he grinned.

"I don't know exactly what to do," said Dean miserably. "I wanted to go to Dry Forks—and here I am. I haven't any idea how to get there."

"We're liable to go there," said Sleepy. "Anythin' can happen down in this country."

"Yes, I have noticed that," said Dean. "It happened to me. You don't live here?"

"No," smiled Hashknife, "we stopped here to fill our canteen at the old well, when you and your masqueradin' pardner rode in. He tried to smoke us out. Haven't yuh any idea why he tied yuh up in that shack?"

"No idea at all," replied Dean. "He said I would find out soon enough."

Hashknife smiled thoughtfully, as he considered Dean. The kid was good-looking, evidently educated, and not a little bewildered. Perhaps he was a little homesick, too.

Sleepy looked critically at Hashknife, as he said, "You and that pointer-dog nose of yours!"

"What is wrong with his nose?" asked Dean innocently.

"Nothin'," replied Sleepy soberly. "I reckon we're goin' to Dry Forks."

"I hope so," said Dean. "I know I never could find it alone."

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy tightened the cinches on their saddles. Hashknife looked over Dean's riding-rig, changed the position of the blanket, and cinched the saddle.

"I hate to get on," said Dean. "I am so sore and stiff."

They helped him mount, and he seemed able to handle his own horse.

"We'll find a town somewhere down this little valley," assured Hashknife.

"I could eat somethin'—if I was urged," said Sleepy, as they rode away from the sycamores. "Say a couple steaks, three, four eggs, some ham, fried spuds—and anythin' else that might be handy."

"You make me hungry," said Dean soberly.

"What do yuh think it does to me?" asked Sleepy.

"Forget yore stomach, until we get out of here," advised Hashknife. "That masqueradin' jasper can't be far away—and he's still got a six-gun. He might be hankerin' for somethin' to ride upon."

After about three miles on the old road Hashknife relaxed. At least, the man would not get that far down the road to ambush them. A few miles beyond they came to a settlement. It was one long building, housing a small, general store and a saloon. There was no place to get a meal, but they purchased crackers, canned salmon and canned peaches, and washed them down with water from their canteen.

"I have heard of picnics, but this is my first one," remarked Dean.

"Glad yuh like it," said Sleepy. "I'll take mine off a stove."

Neither the storekeeper nor the bartender were overly friendly. Strangers rarely came there. The bartender told them that he had a room upstairs that they could have. It had three bunks—dollar a bunk. They knew Dean was owl-eyed from lack of sleep and exhaustion. The storekeeper had told them that it was twenty miles over the hills to Paint Pot Valley and the town of Dry Forks.

IT WAS about eight o'clock that evening, when a hard-faced cowman came into the saloon, where Sleepy and Dean were trying to coax tunes out of an old music-box on the bar, and Hashknife was talking with the bartender about stable room for their three horses. The man stopped near the doorway for a moment, looking them over, and then came slowly toward Hashknife.

"Hyah, Jim," greeted the bartender, but the man didn't look at him.

Hashknife realized that this man was not on any peaceful mission. He had his right thumb hooked over the belt above his holstered gun, and his eyes were agate-hard, as he said raspingly, "Who rides that Seven R sorrel, tied out there at the rack?"

"Why?" asked Hashknife quietly.

"Why? Because that's my horse. By God, I'll—"

Hashknife and the man looked each other squarely in the eyes, and it was the cattleman who blinked and looked away. Call it hypnotism, or what you may, few men ever looked into Hashknife's eyes—and kept on looking.

"You'll do what?" asked Hashknife calmly.

"Well, I—huh! But it's my horse." The man's voice had lost its belligerent tone, and seemed rather apologetic.

"I don't know who owns it," said Hashknife. "A couple pole-cats kidnaped this young man in Oro Grande last night, and they tied him on that sorrel. One of 'em brought him to an old deserted homestead a few miles north of here and locked him in a shed. We happened to be there, and durin' the ruckus we downed the man's other horse and he took to the brush on foot. We're headin' for Dry Forks—and the kid's got to have somethin' to ride."

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed the man. "What sort of a lookin' hairpin was this above-mentioned pole-cat?"

"Oh, about five feet, ten inches, hundred and eighty. He is an awful fast runner, if that means anythin' to yuh."

"That'd be who, Alex?" he asked the bartender, who shook his head.

"I dunno anybody which is real fast on foot," said the bartender.

"He wore a mask, too," said Dean, "and swore awful."

"That kinda evidence would hang most of us," said the cowman dryly. "Sorry I jumped yuh, Mister," he added, "but a feller hates to lose a good horse. My name's Randall, and I own the Seven R spread."

"I don't blame yuh for not wantin' to lose a horse. I'm kinda touchy about things like that myself," said Hashknife. "What kind of a deal can we fix up? The kid's got to ride. Was that yore hull on the sorrel?"

"No, I don't own the saddle nor bridle. I'll tell yuh what yuh do. You take the sorrel over to Dry Forks, and turn him loose. He's a homer."

"I'd rather pay you," said Dean.

"No, no, son. You go right ahead. I know yuh ain't stealin' my horse, and I don't need him now. Good cuttin'-horse, plenty rope-wise. But if yuh happen to hanker for a ride early in the mornin'—better let one of these boys uncock him for yuh. He frosts up pretty easy, and gets kinda kinky."

Hashknife bought a drink for all of them. The bartender had agreed to let them have

stable-room; so they went out to put up the animals. After they were gone the bartender said to the cattleman:

"Jim, I ain't never seen you cool off like that—so sudden. And you done it, before he explained how they got the sorrel. What happened?"

"Alex, I dunno," replied Randall thoughtfully. "I was tearin' mad, when I came up to that high-pocket gent. You know how I feel toward horse-thieves. Well, sir," Randall laughed shortly, "I looked him square in the eye, and I—well, it kinda took all the mad out of me, I guess. Somehow, I kinda felt—well, maybe he *didn't* steal that horse."

"That story about the young feller bein' kidnaped sounds fishy, Jim."

"Not when that tall feller tells it. I'll buy a drink."

"You ain't sure he'll turn that sorrel loose at Dry Forks."

"Yes, I am, Alex—he told me he would."

THE three men came back and gave the padlock key to the bartender, who showed them the room. It wasn't much, but better than no room. They were all tired, especially Dean, who had not slept the night before, and he was snoring almost as soon as he pulled a blanket over himself.

Hashknife heard Randall tell the bartender good-night, and ride away. Sleepy's snores mingled with Dean's, but Hashknife remained awake. Something told him that everything was not exactly right. It was only a hunch, but his hunches often turned out right.

An hour later he heard two riders dismount in front, and come into the saloon below. He slid out of his blankets and quietly opened the door. There was a narrow hallway to the stairs, which led down to an outside entrance. At the bottom, and to the right, was a door leading to the saloon.

Hashknife went down the stairs in his bare feet and listened at the door. The two men were apparently at the bar, talking with the bartender, who was telling them about the kidnaping. He heard Randall's name used, but in what connection he did not hear. One man's nickname was Scotty, the other, Slim. One of them used a lot of bitter profanity, and the bartender warned him to lower his voice. Then they talked so low that Hashknife was unable to hear what was said

Then he heard one of them remark:

"Hell, they've got to git their horses out of the stable in the mornin'. We'll sleep in there tonight, and when they come—" The rest was inaudible. The other man said, after some more quiet conversation:

"Hell, Alex, you don't have to worry! You don't know who done it. You've got Randall to prove why they came here. You was asleep and didn't see anybody. Let's have one more drink."

Hashknife heard the bartender say, "Here is the key. Better leave it unlocked. If anythin' slips, I don't want to know anythin' about it, and they might come to me for the key."

Hashknife carefully opened the outside door and went out. All he had on was his underwear. He circled the building and crouched in the shadow, where he saw the two men go to the stable, carrying some blankets. They unlocked the padlock, went inside and closed the door behind them. Hashknife slid cautiously along the corner, fitted the hasp in place, closed the padlock, and went back to the room. No one saw him.

Sleepy and Dean were snoring, as he crawled into his blankets.

They were up at daylight. Dean was so stiff and sore that he could hardly dress, but he was game. Sleepy said, as he pulled on his boots:

"If there was only a place to eat breakfast, I'd like some aigs and a hunk of ham, with flapjacks on the side—and coffee. Man, I crave a lot of food."

Hashknife buckled on his belt and then stretched his lean muscles.

"The bartender batches in back of the saloon," he said. "Maybe he'll cook breakfast for us."

"Yeah—and maybe not," said Sleepy. "He ain't overflowin' with the milk of human kindness, if yuh ask me."

They went down into the empty saloon, and Hashknife knocked on the door of the bartender's quarters. A sleepy voice called:

"I've done unlocked the stable door. Go ahead—and good-luck."

The door wasn't fastened, and Hashknife opened it. The bartender was still in his little bunk, peering out from under a blan-

ket. There was a small stove, table, two chairs.

"I told yuh the stable door is unlocked," said the bartender.

"Yeah, I know," said Hashknife. "Nice of yuh. How about cookin' some breakfast for us, Alex; we're hungry?"

"Not me," growled the bartender. "I don't cook for nobody—and that's final."

"Final, eh?" smiled Hashknife. "Well, the stable door *is* locked."

"It ain't no such thing. I went out and opened it an hour ago. I figured you'd be leavin' early."

Hashknife went over close and peered down at the bartender.

"I said the door is locked," declared Hashknife.

The bartender sat up and flung the blankets aside. He uncovered the butt of a revolver, which Hashknife grabbed quickly.

"How about cookin' us some breakfast?" asked Hashknife. "Three, four eggs apiece, some ham and maybe some flapjacks, eh? Go ahead, Alex."

"Are you tryin' to *force* me to do this?" asked Alex angrily.

"No, not force, my friend. I wouldn't do that. And don't worry about the two men in the stable—they'll stay put."

The bartender's eyes snapped wide. He was unable to form words for a few moments. Sleepy and Dean stared at Hashknife. He hadn't told them.

"Two men in the stable?" whispered the bartender. "I don't know 'em. I didn't—what men?"

"You better start that fire in the stove," said Hashknife. "The men will keep until after we've been fed. Yuh see, I overheard what was said in there at the bar last night; so I locked the gents in. They've got the key with 'em. After breakfast you can bust the lock."

"Oh, m' Gawd!" gasped the bartender. "I—I—sure, I'll get breakfast. But honest t' Gawd, I don't know what it's all about."

"I do," said Hashknife, "and that's enough for me."

The three of them sat on the bunk and watched Alex cook breakfast. He was very nervous, but willing.

"Yo're a good provider, Alex," declared Sleepy. "Lotsa aigs, ham—my, my, it's a wonder you ain't married."

"Can I put on my pants and shirt?" he asked.

"No," replied Hashknife, "I like yuh thataway. No chance for a hidden gun."

"I wouldn't shoot anybody. Honest, I'm—I ain't got nothin' to do with it."

"Don't lie," said Hashknife quietly. "I heard all about it. And don't try to tell me that you and Scotty and Slim ain't in cahoots. Why did yuh fellers kidnap this young man?"

"Oh, m' Gawd, I didn't," wailed the bartender. "I swear I didn't."

"Get the breakfast," said Hashknife, "and stop wavin' yore arms."

It was a good breakfast, too, and plentiful. The bartender did not stint. They made him sit on the bunk, while they ate.

"This is all new to me," said Dean. "Maybe I should be frightened — but I'm not. Maybe it is because I don't know what it is all about."

"Prob'ly," said Hashknife. "Yuh see, there are two men in the stable. We were supposed to walk out there to get our horses, and they'll shoot us down."

"Why?" asked Dean. "What have we done?"

"Alex, maybe you can answer that one," suggested Hashknife.

"Oh, m' Gawd—no!" wailed the bartender. "I don't know anythin'."

"Don't say that," said Sleepy. "Yo're smarter than yuh was, I'm sure."

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"If we stuck around here, you'd get to the head of yore class. Yuh see, Alex—"

A fusillade of muffled revolver shots broke the stillness outside. Sleepy, Dean, and the bartender jerked upright, but Hashknife calmly slid another egg from the platter to his plate.

"Yore friends discovered the door was locked, Alex," he said. "How about some hot coffee?"

"Ain't yuh goin' after 'em?" asked Sleepy.

"I can't use 'em, Sleepy—let 'em go."

"What were they shooting at?" asked Dean nervously.

"Just a padlock, son."

Sleepy went to the back door and looked toward the stable. The stable door was wide open. He came back and sat down.

"We should have plastered them two drygulchers," he said.

"Maybe we'll come back some day, Sleepy. Yuh might tell 'em, Alex."

"Yeah, I—I shore will."

"Do you know," said Dean, well-filled and rested now, "I am beginning to like it. It is so different than I ever thought. Men trying to kill me, and I'm not a bit frightened. Maybe it it because you are not frightened."

"I am," said Sleepy soberly. "I scare easy. Pass the ham."

ON THE way across the hills to Paint Pot Valley, Dean Colbert told Hashknife and Sleepy why he was going to Dry Forks.

"My father was a stock broker for years," he said, "but ill health caused him to sell out and retire. I'm going to make this as short as possible, because you wouldn't be interested in anything, except facts. Shortly after he retired he met a man named George Ellis. This man was a Westerner, and it seems that he owned fifty thousand shares of stock in a mine named the Mule Shoe."

"I've heard of that mine," said Hashknife. "It's one of the biggest producers in Paint Pot Valley."

"That is what I heard," said Dean. "Ellis didn't try to sell the stock to my father, but mentioned having it. He said he was one of the original discoverers, but had little faith in the property; so he took stock and left the organization. My father looked up the stock and discovered it was listed at around two dollars a share.

"To make a long story short, my father bought the fifty thousand shares at a dollar a share. The next day," Dean's voice broke a little, "my father died suddenly, and I inherited, together with a lot of debts, all that mining stock. I know nothing about mines. The stock never paid me any dividends. One day I saw it listed at two dollars and fifty cents a share. I took my stock to a broker, who handled mining stocks, and —well, he had a few shares of Mule Shoe, and they had the same serial numbers as the ones I had. It wasn't difficult to discover that my shares were all counterfeits.

"I couldn't find Mr. Ellis. On the back of the certificates were listed the names of individuals who had owned them. There were only two names, those of a William Allison and George Ellis, both of Dry Forks. I wanted to find out about them; so I wrote to Mr. Allison. He didn't answer my letter. I wrote again, telling him I was coming to Dry Forks. I had a return address on both letters, but they never came back. That is why I came down to this country."

"Well," said Hashknife, "all you'll have to do is find Mr. Ellis or Mr. Allison and make them give the money back."

Dean looked closely at Hashknife, as he said, "They wouldn't do that. But I might expose them so they wouldn't do the same thing to anyone else."

"Son," smiled Hashknife, "that is just why they kidnaped you. They don't want that to happen."

"Do you think that?"

"Can you think of any other reason for bein' kidnaped?"

"No, I really can't."

"Then go easy in Dry Forks, son. Men who will hire kidnapers, will hire killers."

"Why didn't they kill him, instead of kidnapin' him in Oro Grande?" asked Sleepy.

"Maybe," suggested Hashknife, "they wanted to be sure he was the right man, and maybe they wanted to ask him a few questions, before they sunk him in a hole. Lots of reasons for holdin' him over, Sleepy."

"That sounds rather gruesome," said Dean. "I am more frightened now than I was yesterday."

"That's fine," grinned Hashknife. "When yo're scared—yo're careful."

IT WAS late afternoon, when they rode off the hills and into Paint Pot Valley. They had not followed any trail, because there wasn't any trails, except those made by cattle which wound aimlessly, usually ending up at water or a ranch.

A barb-wire fence blocked their way, and they were obliged to follow it to a gate, where a sort of road led them down past the buildings of a ranch. Two men were at the corral, as they came into the place. One was a hard-faced, hairy specimen of the genus cowpuncher, while the other was tall and thin, pale of face, wearing store-clothes. The three men pulled up, and the cowboy said:

"Howdy, strangers."

"Hyah, cowboy," smiled Hashknife. "Which way is Dry Forks?"

"Straight down thataway," replied the cowboy, pointing. "Four, five miles."

"Much obliged. We came across the hills and ran into yore fence. Took the liberty of cuttin' through the place."

"That's all right. This is the Flyin' A spread. Yuh go out that gate and hit the main road to Dry Forks."

Hashknife thanked him, and they rode on.

"That's a salty-lookin' saddle-tramp, but the other feller looks like he plumb kept out of the sunshine," remarked Sleepy.

"Prob'ly come down here for his health —and scared he'll find it," remarked Hashknife. "This air ought to be good for what ails him."

The town of Dry Forks, the only town in Paint Pot Valley, was not exactly a metropolis, but larger than most cattle towns. Two big producing gold mines, the Mule Shoe and the Golden Calf, and the development of other properties, filled the town with miners, prospectors, and the usual run of riff-raff that follow new strikes. There was plenty activity. The streets were narrow and dusty, flanked with wooden sidewalks and false-fronted buildings. Dean was rather thrilled. They put the horses in a feed corral, where they would give Dean's sorrel a good feed, before turning him out to find his way home.

EVEN at that distance you could hear the thud of the stamp-mills, and see the gaunt buildings that housed the machinery of the mines. They managed to secure a room at the hotel. Hashknife advised Dean to use another name, and he registered as Dan Colt.

"That's a good name," agreed Sleepy. "With so many Colts in this country, they'll never pay any attention."

"I'd like a bath," said Dean.

"Who wouldn't?" retorted the bat-eared clerk, and showed them the room, where an extra cot gave them sleeping space.

The windows were dusty, the floor dusty.

"I'll have somebody swamp out the place soon's possible," said the clerk.

"No bathroom?" asked Dean.

The clerk laughed. "Yuh find jokers wherever yuh go," he said. "I'll have a woman bring up some water for yuh."

They went out and looked over the town. The Ocotillo Saloon seemed to be the center of social activity. It was a big place, with a gambling room, and a big honkatonk.

Rough booths had been built along one side, and the "girls" were rustling drinks.

"For a place like this, they have a lot of waitresses," said Dean. "But their uniforms are certainly quaint."

Even in the daytime the games were running full blast. Two miners started a fist-fight, which almost wrecked a booth, but two tough bouncers quelled it quickly. Steve Albright, the owner, was in evidence. He was a tall, gray-haired man, hard-faced, hard-eyed, well-dressed. Monte Chavez, his boss gambler, was a slender, handsome man, with sleek, black hair, and a pin-point mustache.

Hashknife and Sleepy had seen many places like this, but to Dean it was a decided novelty. They were standing near the doorway, when a tall, lean cowboy bumped into Hashknife. They glanced at each other for a moment, and the tall cowboy's eyes snapped wide open.

"My Gawd, it cain't be!" he exclaimed. "It jist cain't be!"

"Shorty Lane!" exclaimed Sleepy. "You ol' son-of-a-rooster, you!"

"Let's git out where there's room to war-dance," said Shorty, and they shoved their way outside.

"It's been four years since I see you two galoots," said Shorty. "Where-at yuh been keepin' yourselves?"

"Oh, here and there, Shorty," smiled Hashknife. "Whatcha got on yore bosom?"

"Oh, that!" snorted Shorty. "I'm deputy sheriff here."

"Deputy sheriff?" queried Sleepy. "Why, the last time I seen you—"

"Yeah, I know. I sneaked a hitch on the laig of a pool-table, after I'd done tied four lass-ropes together, and when I dallied off on m' saddle horn, I took most everythin' out of that saloon in Sundance. That sheriff chased me plumb out of the county. But I got m'self a heap contrite, Sleepy, and mended m' ways. Gosh, you fellers are good for sore eyes."

They introduced Dean to him, using the name of Colt.

Shorty grinned. "He shore sounds kinda six-shooterish," he said. "C'mon down and meet m' harassed boss, Len Hogue. He's m' brother-in-law by marriage. My sister

made a mistake. You'll like Len—mebbe."

"How's crime, Shorty?" asked Sleepy, as they walked across the street.

"Ain't none," replied the deputy. "I was a-tellin' Len t'day, that if we didn't git a prisoner pretty quick we might as well go out of business. Where-at did you *pelicanos* come from, anyway?"

"Kinda slaunchwise, across them hills," said Sleepy. "Little valley over there. Saloon and store. Twenty-five miles, as the crow flies."

"Outside m' jurisdiction," said Shorty. "Here's the office. It's so damn small that yuh go in backwards, so yuh won't have t' turn around to git out."

Sheriff Len Hogue was sprawled in his old swivel-chair, feet on the desk-top. Len was five feet, eight, and would weigh close to two hundred. Len had carrot-colored hair, what there was left of it, and his mustache, the same color, grew heavy on one side, sparse on the other. He listened impassively as Shorty completed the introductions, and then shoved out a huge paw, not bothering to get up.

"He'd have all the trouble of gittin' his feet up there agin," explained Shorty.

"Old friends, Shorty?" asked Len.

"Not so damn old," replied the deputy. "Oh, mebbe forty. The young'n is a stranger of mine, but bein' with Hashknife and Sleepy is enough f'r me. Set down, folks. That cot'll pack two of yuh."

"It is real cosy in here," said Dean. Len chuckled deep in his big chest. "Cosy!" he said. "Ain't room to whip a cat. Wasn't built for me and Shorty. I reckon their first sheriff was a midget."

"Didn't need big ones in them days," said Shorty. He turned to Dean. "How long you been rawhidin' with these two ranahans?"

"I don't believe I understand," said Dean.

"Since yesterday," said Hashknife. "We picked him up. He got lost, comin' down from Oro Grande. How long you lived here, Shorty?"

"Oh, a couple years. Len dragged me into this job, and—"

"Dragged yuh?" Len was indignant.

"Practically," said Shorty calmly. "You asked me to take it."

"After yuh hounded me for two weeks—you and yore sister."

Shorty lighted the lamp on the sheriff's desk.

"I have t' do all the chores around here," he complained. "Light the lamp at dark, and blow her out, when we close up. But that's all I can expect; workin' for a relative. It don't pay. They impose on yuh."

"Don't you fellers ever have anythin' to do but light the lamp and blow it out?" asked Sleepy. "Why, a place like this ought to have a man for breakfast every mornin'."

"Dry Forks," said the sheriff soberly, "is a model town. Folks has been taught that crime don't pay. Why, half the punchers don't wear guns to town any more. We have got 'em buffaloed; a criminal wouldn't last long enough to git a meal—not in Dry Forks. Why, they measure lumber with the Golden Rule and—"

Len Hogue, the sheriff, stopped. From somewhere came the unmistakable report of a gun. He slid his feet off the desk, hitched up his gun-belt and got to his feet.

"What comes after the Golden Rule, Sheriff?" inquired Sleepy.

A man was running in the darkness across the street. He loped up to the open doorway of the office, panting heavily.

"Somebody got shot—back of the Ocotillo!" he blurted.

"Braggin' don't pay," said Len. "C'mon, Shorty."

THEY all went with the sheriff. There was a crowd behind the big saloon, circling the body of a man who sprawled on his face. Two lanterns had been brought. Len Hogue quickly moved the crowd back, giving room for a doctor to make an examination. The man was of medium height, gray-haired, fairly well dressed.

"Buckshot—at short range," said the sheriff, after talking with the doctor.

No one admitted seeing the murder, which it had to be, because the dead man was not armed. No one even saw the flash of the gun. The man's name was Fox. Hashknife heard Steve Albright, owner of the Ocotillo, say that Fox had been drunk for two days. They took the body away.

The fact that there had been a murder did not affect the gaiety of the saloon. Business was resumed at once. Hashknife met Shorty Lane in front of the hotel and they sat down to talk it over.

"Fox had been around here a long time," said Shorty. "He didn't work for anybody, but had money. Just kinda retired, I reckon. I dunno who'd blast him, because he was a quiet sort of a hombre, even when he was drinkin'."

"There's got to be a reason," said Hashknife.

"Yeah, I reckon so," sighed the lanky deputy. "Len's worried. He says these killin's run in threes. Accordin' to him, we've got to have two more corpses to fill the book. I dunno."

"That'll all depend," said Hashknife.

"Depend on what, Hashknife?"

"Whether two more men are killed. Who owns the Flyin' A spread?"

"Steve Albright, the same feller who owns the Ocotillo."

"We came down through the Flyin' A on our way here, Shorty. We saw two men out there. One was kinda square, with plenty hair, and the other was a pale-face."

"That hairy one was Hobo Osborne," laughed Shorty. "He ain't had a shave nor a hair-cut since Sittin' Bull stood up. The other hombre is named Al Easton. He's sickly. Friend of Albright, they say, and he's out here for his health. Been here about a year, and he don't look a damn bit different than when he showed up. He don't come to town often."

"Shorty, do you know a man named William Allison?"

"William Allison? No-o-o, I don't reckon I do. What's his business?"

"Prob'ly a minin' man, Shorty."

"No, I don't remember anybody by that name. They come and go."

"Know anybody by the name of George Ellis?"

"No, I don't. Another minin' man, Hashknife?"

"Yeah, I think so."

The sheriff came up from the doctor's place. He said, "Whoever got Fox wasn't goin' to make any mistakes. They riddled him with buckshot at short range."

"It's darned funny," remarked Shorty. "Fox wasn't a trouble-maker. He minded his own business."

"What was his business?" asked Hashknife.

"He didn't have any," said Shorty. "Just kinda loafed. He had a room with the Perkins family, out at the edge of town, and took most of his meals out there, I reckon."

"How about searchin' his room?" asked Hashknife. "Maybe he left somethin' that might show who shot him?"

"By golly, that's a good idea!" exclaimed the sheriff. "C'mon."

IT WAS less than a quarter of a mile out to the Perkins home. Shorty explained that Ed Perkins worked at the Mule Shoe Mine, and Mrs. Perkins took in a few boarders. There was a light in the house, but no one answered the knock on the door.

"Mrs. Perkins is prob'ly out some'ers," said Shorty.

Hashknife tried the door and it was unlocked. He opened it, and they looked in. Mrs. Perkins was there all right, but roped to a rocking-chair, and gagged with a towel, which concealed most of her face. They quickly removed the gag, and she looked at them, her eyes full of suspicion, until she recognized the sheriff and deputy. Mrs. Perkins was a tall, gaunt, raw-boned woman, her hair standing up on her head, like the roach on a grizzly.

"Two men came in on me," she said huskily. "They was masked. They tied me up and put that damn towel over my mouth and nose, and I almost suffocated. I don't know what they wanted—they didn't say. I heard 'em go out the back door. They might at least have let me get a few breaths of air."

"Let's take a look around," suggested Hashknife. "Mrs. Perkins, will you show us the room Mr. Fox had?"

"Mr. Fox *had?* He's still got it."

"Fox was shot and killed this evenin', Mrs. Perkins," said Len Hogue, the sheriff.

"Heavenly days! Shot and killed? Ah, that's bad, Sheriff. He was a fine man. Who killed him—if you happen to know?"

"I don't happen to know," said Len.

She showed them Fox's room, which had been searched completely. Even the bedding had been yanked off and flung on the floor. All three drawers of the little dresser had been dumped in the middle of the floor, the contents pawed over and scattered.

"You had the right idea, Hashknife," said Shorty.

"I had it too late," said Hashknife.

Mrs. Perkins was unable to describe the

two men, except that they were masked and carried guns.

"They were dressed like cowpunchers," she said.

The three men went back to the office. Len Hogue said, "This here killin' must have had a reason behind it, Hashknife."

"Well, it kinda looks as though Fox had somethin' they wanted."

"Yeah, that's right. They blasted him down, and then searched his room. I wonder if they found what they wanted."

"Some day," said Hashknife, "we'll ask 'em."

HASHKNIFE went to the hotel and found Sleepy and Dean in the room.

"We was lookin' for yuh, but couldn't find yuh," said Sleepy.

Hashknife told them what they found at the Perkins home.

"That ain't anythin'," grinned Sleepy. "Me and Dean went down to the doctor's place, when they carried the body down there, and we got a good look at the victim."

"Yeah?" said Hashknife curiously. "And then what?"

"Mr. Fox," said Dean, "is George Ellis, the man who sold my father the counterfeit stock in the Mule Shoe Mine."

"Are yuh sure of that, Dean?"

"Yes. I saw him several times—and I'm sure it is the same man."

"Well, that's interestin'," said Hashknife, thoughtfully. "For some reason they murdered Mr. Fox. Then they had to search his room, cleanin' out everythin' that might incriminate them—and prob'y takin' what money he had left. Two masked men, dressed like punchers.

"Yuh know, this is a hot climate fer Dean—and us, too. They kidnap him, keepin' him away from Dry Forks. He gets away. If he sees Fox he will recognize him. So they kill Fox. At least, Dean can't have Fox arrested for sellin' counterfeit stock. They're a bad bunch. Son," he turned to Dean, "if I was you, I'd pull out of this place. You can't never get that money back—and they'll kill yuh—I'm afraid."

Dean's jaw tightened. "I'm going to stay here," he said firmly. "You two helped me—and they know it. I'll get me a gun and—say here."

"Well," sighed Hashknife, "if yuh want to get forked—yo're of age. I was just speakin' of yore health. Yuh saw what happened to Fox."

Dean shuddered a little, but nodded.

"Still want to stay here?" asked Sleepy curiously.

"Certainly. If they kill me—I'm dead, that's all."

"Yeah," said Hashknife dryly, "that's one satisfaction—they can't do anythin' worse to yuh, Son."

"Have yuh ever done any shootin', Dean?" asked Sleepy.

"No, I never have, Sleepy. Is it difficult?"

"No, it ain't difficult. After twenty- twenty-five years of it, yuh get pretty good at it. That is, if yuh live long enough to learn how."

"Will you teach me, Sleepy?" asked Dean.

"Well, I—yeah, I can learn yuh how to pull a trigger, but I'd a heap rather shoot yore enemies for yuh, pardner—it'd prob'ly be safer."

"For me?" asked Dean.

"Yeah—and for me, too. We'll see about that gun later."

NEXT morning after breakfast, Hashknife wandered up to the postoffice. The postmaster was an elderly man, grown old in the Dry Forks postoffice, and liked by everyone. Hashknife drew him to one side and questioned him about William Allison and George Ellis. The old man knew everybody in Paint Pot Valley, but he didn't know anyone by that name.

He had an assistant, a young man named Henry Craddock. He called Henry out to them, and Hashknife said to him:

"I want you to tell me the name of the man who gets mail sent to William Allison or George Ellis."

"William Allison and George Ellis?" queried the young man.

"The man's name now ain't Allison nor Ellis—but he gets their mail."

"Just a moment," said Henry, and hurried back to the postoffice.

A few moments later the back door was closed gently.

Hashknife heard it, but the postmaster didn't notice it. He said:

"Henry is very efficient. He keeps a rec-

ord of everything. I don't know what I'd do without Henry."

"I just have a feelin' that you'll find out pretty quick," said Hashknife.

"Why, what do you mean?"

"I ain't exactly sure," smiled Hashknife, "but I'm afraid Henry has taken a vacation."

"Vacation? Why, I— Henry must be—"

He hurried to the rear of the room, where the post-office was enclosed. Hashknife heard him open the back door and call, "Henry! Oh, Henry!" Then he came back, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Henry isn't there," he said.

"I didn't think he would be," smiled Hashknife. "But it's all right. I had my pardner and the deputy sheriff planted out there. Would yuh like to go down to the sheriff's office and talk with Henry?"

"Yes, I— no, I can't do it. No one to leave here—and I'm not allowed to close the office at this time of the day. My God, what is this all about? Who, Henry, is as honest as—well—"

"I hope Henry can prove his honesty," said Hashknife, and walked out.

HENRY CRADDOCK was in the sheriff's office, surrounded by Len Hogue, Shorty Lane, Sleepy and Dean. Henry was a sallow, blond-haired boy, about twenty years of age, but he had a belligerent jaw and a hard eye.

"No spik English," remarked Sleepy, as Hashknife came in. "He tried to pull a gun on us, and I had to bust him one."

The gun, a short-barreled Colt .45 was on the sheriff's desk. Hashknife sat down and considered Henry thoughtfully.

"Why did yuh run away, Henry?" he asked quietly.

Henry merely looked away, his lips tight.

"No one is goin' to hurt yuh, Henry," said Hashknife. "All we want yuh to do is tell us who got the mail for George Ellis and William Allison. It can't hurt you any—and we'll see that they don't hurt you."

But Henry Craddock was a very determined young man. Once over his fright, he defied them, possibly realizing that they had no evidence against him, except his panicky escape from the office. Hashknife realized the futility of trying to make him talk; so he told the sheriff to let him go.

"You're damn right, you'll let me go," said Henry. "You ain't so smart—none of you."

"That remains to be seen," said Hashknife.

"Yes, and I'll go back to my job," declared Henry. "You ain't got anything on me."

The elderly postmaster came down to the office, seeking information.

"Henry told me you exonerated him," said the postmaster. "Did you?"

"We turned him loose," replied Len Hogue. He pointed at the gun.

"Does that belong to yore office?" he asked.

"Why, yes, I—I believe it does. Did Henry have that gun?"

"Not only had it," said Sleepy. "but he tried to pull it."

"My, my! I can't understand Henry. He is such a reliable boy."

"Better forget the whole thing," advised Hashknife. "After all, the boy just got excited, and tried to run away."

"Do you—do you think I should keep him?"

"By all means," smiled Hashknife. "He'll be all right."

The postmaster bustled out, probably glad he didn't have to break in a new boy. Len Hogue drew a deep breath and declared:

"That damn kid ort to have his pants kicked out of Dry Forks."

"And him in 'em," added Shorty. "He's a salty young sprout. Imagine him tryin' to pull a gun on me and Sleepy!"

"There'll be more guns pulled before this is over," said Hashknife.

"Why do yuh think that?" asked Shorty.

"Well, Henry will prob'ly tell 'em we questioned him, and they'll get scared enough to shoot."

"Who do yuh suspect?" asked Len Hogue curiously.

"How many folks do yuh have here in Dry Forks, Len?" asked Hashknife.

"Oh I dunno—mebbe three thousand, countin' Chinamen."

"You don't need to count them—but we can suspect all the rest."

HASHKNIFE saw Henry Craddock at the Ocotillo Saloon that evening, buying drinks for one of the girls. Sleepy and Shorty were playing pool, and they told

Hashknife that Dean had stayed in his room to write some letters. Hashknife decided to watch Henry. Someone had hired Henry to hold out the letters to George Ellis and William Allison, and Hashknife wanted to see who talked with the kid, who was getting drunk.

The girl stuck with Henry too close for anyone else to contact him, but when she left to do her turn in the honkatonk, Henry slipped quietly out a rear door. Hashknife went out and crossed the street to the front of the hotel, where he saw Henry also cross the street and enter an alley at one side of the hotel.

Feeling that the young man was up to something, Hashknife went upstairs. There was a back stairway and a balcony, unlighted at night. The halls of the hotel were also unlighted. Hashknife halted at the top of the lobby stairs, away from the light, and saw someone come into the hallway from the rear balcony.

He was unable to see just where the man went, but he heard a door shut, and a moment later the report of a revolver thudded in one of the rooms. As Hashknife raced down the hallway he heard a crash, and a shouted exclamation. He flung the door of Dean's room open, gun in hand, but stopped short. Dean whirled from looking through what remained of a front window.

The air was full of powder smoke. Dean's eyes were wide, as he blurted, "Did you see it, Hashknife?"

"What happened?" asked Hashknife.

"Why, a masked man came in! He had a gun in his hand. I—I had just finished writing a letter, and I had picked up the bottle of ink. That man was going to shoot me, and I—I hit him right in the face with that bottle of ink. I guess it busted. Then he—" Dean drew a deep breath, "He backed up so fast, trying to get the ink out of his eyes, that he backed right through that window!"

"Where did that bullet hit?" asked Hashknife, looking around. "Oh, yeah, there it is—up there in the ceilin'."

A number of people had heard the shot, and were out on the sidewalk, asking questions. Hashknife walked to the window. It opened about ten feet above the sloping porch of the hotel entrance. No one came upstairs.

"Can yuh tell me what that man looked like?" asked Hashknife.

"No," replied Dean nervously. "I—I really can't. I know he had a gun, and he said he was going to kill me. I hardly remember throwing that ink bottle. Wherever he is, I'm afraid he is pretty black. And it is all over the floor, too—and some on the wall."

"Lock yore door," said Hashknife. "Always keep it locked, Dean."

"I sure will! Golly, that was a close call."

Len Hogue, Shorty and Sleepy were outside the hotel, when Hashknife came down. No one seemed to know where the shot had been fired, although several of them had heard the report. Hashknife took them aside and told them what happened, but he didn't tell them that he suspected Henry Craddock.

"Maybe," suggested Len, "it was the man who kidnaped the kid."

"Yeah, it could have been," agreed Hashknife.

They went down to the office to talk things over. Len Hogue's experience only covered rustling and horse-stealing, and he didn't understand that the counterfeiting of mining stock, and the proper distribution might bring in more money than all the rustling in the country combined.

"Yuh see," explained Hashknife, "they got fifty thousand dollars out of Dean's father for worthless certificates. That's a lot of money, Len. Maybe the next deal they'll make in New York—and another in Frisco. Unless they're stopped cold, they can counterfeit shares of anything they can buy. Is it any wonder they'll kill to save their business?"

"But why come down here to do the job, Hashknife?"

"That's what I'm wonderin', too. We'll have to keep our eyes open and listen to everythin'. And we'll have to watch Henry Craddock. He's got some knowledge that might help us out a lot. And we've got to watch Dean."

"What's he done?" asked Len.

"Tried to get himself killed off a couple time," replied Hashknife.

"The thing to do," said Shorty, "is hang around and see who kills him."

"He'll appreciate that," said Sleepy dryly. "I ain't never seen anybody that appreciates small things like he does. But don't worry

about Dean. Any tenderfoot that can route a masked man with a bottle of ink don't need help—much. The ink-bottle is mightier than the six-gun."

"I don't see how he bounced into the street and not get hurt," said Len. "Mebbe we'll find a cripple in the mornin'."

BUT there was no evidence of any cripple next morning. About noon the postmaster came down to the office and asked Len if he had seen Henry Craddock. The young man, due at the office at eight o'clock, had not put in an appearance, and his bed had not been slept in at the rooming house.

"He was drinkin' at the Ocotillo last night," said the sheriff. "Maybe he's piled up in a corner some'ers, Mr. Perkins."

Len wasn't greatly concerned about Henry. Hashknife drifted down to the office a little later, and Len told him about the missing Henry.

"Dean wanted to learn how to shoot a six-gun," smiled Hashknife, "so Sleepy and him took the horses and went out south of town for the first lesson."

"That kid's got quite a lot of nerve," remarked Len. "Things don't seem to faze him much."

"Dean's all right," agreed Hashknife. "The only trouble is—the blamed fool don't realize he's settin' on a keg of powder After the first shock of hittin' that masked man with the bottle of wine, he didn't seem much concerned. Why, he went downstairs and got another bottle; so he could write the rest of his letters."

"He did, eh? Well, yuh can't never—"

"O-oh!" grunted Hashknife. "Our target-shooters are back—fast!"

Sleepy and Dean dismounted in front of the office and came in quickly. Sleepy said, "Has anybody missed Henry Craddock?"

"He ain't showed up on his job," said Len.

"He's out there, about two miles, sprawled out in a dry-wash," said Sleepy. "Somebody centered him."

"Not only that," added Dean, "but he's got ink all over him."

"Ink?" gasped Len. "Yuh don't mean—holy henhawks! He tried to kill Dean last night—"

"And that ink-bottle cut a gash over his left eye," said Sleepy.

"I'll get Doc Titus," said Len. "See if yuh can find Shorty."

Shorty had seen them ride in, and was on his way to the office. There was a short delay, while Doctor Titus hitched up his buckboard team, but it was a short drive to the bank of the dry-wash. Buzzards were circling over the strip of sand, when they drove up.

Evidently the body had been flung from a bank, as there were no footprints, except those made by Sleepy and Dean, and there was no blood on the sand under the body. Henry Craddock had been shot through the heart at short range. His ink-spattered shirt was burned from the powder-blast. His right arm was broken between the wrist and elbow, and the palm of his right hand was badly scraped, evidently caused when he fell from the hotel window. His face was still ink-stained, and there was a cut over his left eye, presumably caused by the ink bottle.

Dean was visibly impressed, and, for the first time, seemed to realize this was a serious situation. Hashknife explained to him his theory why Henry Craddock had been killed.

"Yuh see, Dean," he explained, "they sent Henry up to yore room last night to try and kill you. He not only failed, but was so badly injured that it would be easy to identify him as the man who tried to kill you. They couldn't afford to have Henry in the hands of the law, for fear he might talk too much; so they killed him. Dead men tell no tales, Dean."

"But, gosh, he's only a kid!"

"Yeah—and so are you. They sent a kid to shoot yuh, pardner; next time they'll send a man. Did yuh do any shootin' this mornin'?"

"No—we didn't have a chance. Sleepy was going to set up some tincans on the sand—but we found Henry down there."

DRY FORKS suddenly realized that something was decidedly wrong, when they brought the young man's body back there. The sheriff's office was besieged by folks who had known Henry, but the sheriff was tight-lipped. Not so, the postmaster. He talked too much. Several men, including Steve Albright, owner of the Ocotillo, came down to the sheriff's office to get informa-

tion. The postmaster had told them that Henry tried to shoot Shorty Lane, and was in custody for a while yesterday.

"We don't know what it's all about," said the sheriff. "Hashknife Hartley questioned Henry about some letters, and Henry bolted out the back door, with a gun. We let him go, after talkin' with him."

TOM MALLORY, the prosecuting attorney, wanted all the details. He was very pompous, but got little information.

"Who are these three men — Hartley, Stevens and Colt?" he asked the sheriff.

"Colt is from the East," replied the sheriff, "and Hartley and Stevens are old friends of Shorty Hogue. And for yore own information, Tom, Hartley has done some very fine work for the Cattlemen's Association. He and Steven work together."

"Did the association send them here?"

"No."

"You don't seem to want to tell me all you know, Len."

"Tom," replied the sheriff soberly, "do yuh want to get shot?"

"Shot? Certainly not!"

"Then just tell folks that you can't make head nor tail out of the killin' of Henry Craddock—and neither can I."

"But, damn it, I am the prosecutor, Len! I've got to know things. It is your duty to tell me everything you know."

"F'r instance" queried Len soberly.

"Who murdered Henry Craddock—and why?"

Len thought it over for a few moments. Then he said, "C'mon, Tom, I'll show yuh somethin'."

He took the lawyer back to the jail, where there were four empty cells. They looked into each, and came back to the office.

"That doesn't make sense, Len. Why show me empty cells?" asked the lawyer.

"To answer yore damn fool question, Tom. If I knowed who killed Henry Craddock—all them cells wouldn't be empty."

"I see. Well, why didn't you just say so, and let it go at that?"

"Well, I reckon I just wanted to impress yuh."

"What has Hartley and Stevens got to do with it, Len?"

"Nothin' that I know anythin' about."

"I believe I'll ask Hartley myself."

"Yeah, that's a right good idea. But if yuh get an answer, I'll buy yuh a drink, Tom."

"That's a bet."

Hashknife wanted to talk with the girl he had seen with Henry Craddock. He had left her and headed straight for the hotel last night. Hashknife thought he might have said something to her about what he was going to do. Hashknife found out that her name was Della La Plant, and that she was a newcomer to the Ocotillo, a singer. He also found out that her room number was 12. The swamper, who gave him the information, also informed him that she was a "good" girl, and that he wouldn't be able to see her until later in the evening.

"Better kinda be careful," warned the swamper. "They tell me Monte Chavez kinda claims her as his special property—and he's pretty good with a throwin'-knife."

"I'll be careful," smiled Hashknife.

DEAN stayed in his room that night, and kept the door locked. Sleepy and Shorty played pool, while Hashknife moved around through the crowd, waiting a chance to meet Della La Plant. The girls used a back stairway, which led to the stage. Hashknife had no idea that anyone was watching him. He saw the first show, and when the girls were leaving the stage, Hashknife went up the stairway from the gambling room, crossed the balcony and went down a narrow hallway near room number 12. It was quite dark there.

The girls came trooping up, but Hashknife was able to identify the one he wanted to talk with. She seemed frightened for a moment, but he said, "I just want a word with yuh, Miss La Plant."

They moved back, closer to the balcony, where there was more light. She said, "You want to talk with me?"

"Yeah," he said quietly. "Last night you had a drink with Henry Craddock, the young man from the postoffice. He got up suddenly and left yuh alone. You knew they found his body this mornin', didn't yuh?"

A man came up the stairway, stopped at the top and looked around. He was a cowboy, judging from his clothes, and he seemed half-drunk. The girl had started to answer Hashknife, but waited for the man to pass. The man half-staggered into them, and be-

fore Hashknife realized his intentions, the man shoved a revolver against Hashknife's body. The girl saw it and stifled a scream.

"Get out of here, you little fool!" shouted the man. "Get into yore room!"

The girl fled. Hashknife realized now that the man was not drunk, and that any move on his part would cause him to pull that trigger.

"What's the idea?" asked Hashknife.

"You fool—yo're already dead. If you—"

Hashknife jerked back his head, and gasped, "Don't hit him with that!"

The man ducked forward instinctively, trying to prevent someone from hitting him on the back of the head, and his face met a right uppercut, with the weight and strength of the lean Hashknife behind it. And at the same instant, Hashknife's left hand fended the gun aside. Hashknife felt the features of the killer fairly splatter under his knuckles.

The man went down, striking his shoulder against the wall, and crashed to a sitting position, his right hand, still holding the gun, acting as a brace.

Hashknife's right boot-heel crunched down on the back of the man's hand, forcing his fingers to relax. Then he kicked the gun aside. Cursing and spitting out broken teeth, the man surged to his feet, blinded, bleeding, but still willing to fight.

From somewhere inside his shirt he drew another gun—a short Colt. Hashknife hit him on the chin with a jolting left, and the man spun on his heel. A right lashed against his right ear, sending him staggering toward the balcony railing. He still had that gun, but didn't know where to shoot. As his knees hit the railing, he whirled, but Hashknife hit him in the face again, and he went over the railing, taking part of it with him. Several voices yelled in the gambling-room, and then came the crash, as the man's heavy body landed on an unoccupied card-table, splintering it to pieces.

Hashknife went down the hallway to the stairway, which led to the honkatonk stage. He went slowly down to the stage, where several men were handling the scenery. One of them, probably the man in charge, came over to Hashknife and said, "What the hell are you doin' here?"

Hashknife looked closely at him, and the man's belligerent attitude changed as he said, "That side door will let yuh out into the bar."

"Much obliged, my friend," said Hashknife quietly, and walked out.

THERE was commotion in the barroom, as many of the occupants tried to crowd the archway to the gambling room. Hashknife stopped at the bar. He heard the bartender say, "Aw, I guess some drunk fell off the balcony."

"It could happen," said Hashknife.

The bartender looked at him. "Yes, it could," he agreed. "That railin' ain't very strong."

Men were coming away from the gambling room, as some other men were helping the injured cowboy out into the barroom. He was bloody, dazed and somewhat crippled from his fall. They took him to a back room. Sleepy and Shorty came out with the crowd, saw Hashknife and came over to him.

"What happened?" asked Hashknife curiously.

"Somebody," said Shorty, "jist beat hell's delight out of Grat McFee. They must have had a fight upstairs, and Grat fell over the railin'."

Men crowded in at the bar, and Hashknife heard a man say:

"Somebody musta jumped Grat in the dark. Ain't nobody in this country man enough to beat him up thataway in a fair fight."

"That's Hobo Osborne," whispered Shorty. "Grat licked him twice. He's a dirty fighter, that Hobo Osborne."

Sleepy looked closely at Hashknife. There was a splatter of blood on his shirt-front, and some on his sleeves. A closer inspection showed more on the backs of his hands.

"Yuh better wash it off, pardner; they'll be askin' questions," said Sleepy.

"I'll answer 'em," said Hashknife quietly.

Steve Albright, the owner, came up to the bar, asking about the fight, but no one seemed to know who had whipped McFee, nor why. One of the men came from the back room with the information that Grat McFee had a broken nose, two front teeth knocked out, and possibly some broken fingers, where Hashknife had stepped on his hand.

"He won't say who he fought with," said

the man, "but he did say that the man hit him, when he wasn't lookin'."

"I knowed that," said Hobo Osborne. "That's the only way he could lick Grat."

"I seen him," remarked a man at the bar, "and if that feller only hit him, when he wasn't lookin'—he was sure doing' a hell of a lot of lookin' in the wrong direction."

Hobo Osborne couldn't think of any reply; so he left the bar and went back to inspect Grat McFee himself. Len Hogue heard of the trouble and came over to the Ocotillo. He stopped beside Hashknife.

"What happened over here, Hashknife?" he asked.

"I'm not exactly sure, Len," replied Hashknife. "It seems that someone named McFee got into a fight and fell off the balcony."

"Somebody hit him in the dark," corrected Steve Albright. "We don't know who it was, Sheriff."

"Were you there?" asked Hashknife quietly.

The owner of the Ocotillo looked sharply at Hashknife.

"No, I wasn't there," he replied curtly. "Were you?"

"He was here at the bar, Steve," said the bartender. "I was talkin' to him when it happened."

"That's right," growled the gambler, and walked away.

SLEEPY looked at the bartender and at Hashknife, but Hashknife merely smiled lazily. Then Len Hogue saw the bloodstains on Hashknife. He did not say anything about it, merely remarking, "How about goin' down to the office, Hashknife? I reckon the trouble is all over."

"Yeah, it might be a good idea, Len. Sleepy, you might listen around."

"Uh-huh," nodded Sleepy. "Me and Shorty will listen."

Down at the office Hashknife told Len Hogue what happened in that darkened hallway.

"Hashknife, why would Grat McFee try to kill you?" asked Len.

"That," replied Hashknife, "is somethin' I don't *know*—yet."

"Can yuh do any guessin'?"

"Only to myself, Len."

"Uh-huh. Well, you was sure lucky. If yuh hadn't pulled that trick, you'd be dead as a mackerel now."

"The trick is as old as the hills, Len—but it still works. I timed the words and the music perfectly. He ducked right into that uppercut. I had to step on his hand to loosen his gun, but he had another one inside his shirt; so I knocked him off the perch."

"He's a bad-boy," said Len, "but I can't see why he'd want to kill you. Hell, you don't even know him, Hashknife."

"Never saw him before in my life."

Sleepy and Shorty came from the Ocotillo. The doctor had fixed up Grat McFee, and he had gone home with Hobo Osborne. They had heard nothing that McFee might have said about who might have assaulted him in the dark hallway. Hashknife told them what happened, and it filled Shorty with joy. He didn't like Grat McFee.

"But that bartender said you was there at the bar, Hashknife," said Sleepy.

Hashknife grinned slowly. "That," he said, "goes to show how easy it is to prove an alibi, if things work out right. I came down through the honkatonk stage and into the barroom, while the rest of yuh were in the gamblin' room. I spoke to the bartender, who is willin' to swear I was there all the time. But the men on the honkatonk stage knew better. They can swear I came down from the second floor."

"But why'd he want to kill you?" asked Shorty.

"Don't waste yore breath," said the sheriff. "I've done asked him that question. He don't know, and he won't even guess."

Hashknife and Sleepy went back to the hotel, but Dean was not in his room. The door was unlocked and the lamp had been turned low.

"Where do yuh suppose he went?" queried Sleepy.

On the old bureau was a crumpled piece of paper. Hashknife picked it up and smoothed it out. On it had been penciled:

> Come down the back way and over to the sheriff's office.
>
> Hartley.

On the other side of the paper was penciled DEAN COLT.

They went back down to the little lobby.

The elderly man, who acted as night clerk, was smoking his pipe, as he read a dog-eared novel.

"Do you happen to know anythin' about a note that was delivered to Dean Colt tonight?" asked Hashknife.

"I ought to—I delivered it myself."

"Yuh did, eh? Where did you get it?"

"Somebody left it on the counter there. I dunno who it was. I saw who it was fer; so I took it up to him. Anythin' wrong, Mr. Hartley?"

"I hope not," said Hashknife shortly, and they went outside.

"The old decoy note," said Hashknife. "Yuh can't blame the kid. I was afraid they'd get him—and—well, we'll have to do the best we can to get him back. C'mon."

"Are we goin' over to the Ocotillo again?"

"Yeah. I want to find out somethin'."

HASHKNIFE led the way to the honka-tonk, where they got seats at the rear, just before a show started. They watched the show through, but Della La Plant did not appear. Her singing had been a feature of the show, and some of the men yelled for her to sing, but the stage manager did not make any explanation.

They went back to the hotel, where they found Shorty on the sidewalk, talking to Terry Alden, the stage-driver. Terry was just a little drunk, which was not unusual with him.

"I hope t' hell he don't have more'n three heavy trunks," he was remarking to Shorty.

Terry drifted on. Sleepy said, "Who has that many trunks?"

"Aw, Terry's allus crabbin'," said Shorty. "He's got to stop at the Flyin' A in the mornin' and pick up that feller, Al Easton, the sick person. Mebbe he's cured, I dunno."

"Leavin', eh?" queried Hashknife.

"That's what Terry said."

"Is Len still down at the office, Shorty?"

"Yeah, he was there a few minutes ago."

They went down to the office and Hashknife told the sheriff about the missing Dean Colt, and the decoy note they found in the room.

"This," declared Len Hogue, "is gettin' bad, Hashknife. Where can we look for him?"

"We can't—not at night."

THEY sat there and looked at each other, except Hashknife who was staring at the floor, his lips shut to a penciled line. Then he looked up and said slowly:

"Len, I want this office to do somethin'—in the mornin'. I want you to go to the stage-office and tell the office manager that Shorty will take Terry Alden's place on the stage."

"Why—uh—yeah, I can do that. But what's—"

"I can't answer any questions, Len. I want Shorty on that stage. Me and Sleepy will meet the stage out beyond the Flyin' A. Shorty, all you have to do is set there on the seat and let me handle it."

"Why—shore," said Shorty. "But I still don't see—"

"It's a chance," said Hashknife quietly. "Dean's missin', and if the truth was known, that girl, Della La Plant is missin' too. I ain't exactly sure of anythin', but mebbe we'll find out tomorrow. You two will do this, Len?"

"Damn it, I'll do anythin'," said Len. "I'm tired of crime. Why don't we jist go over to the Ocotillo and find out about that girl?"

"I like my way the best," said Hashknife. "Yuh don't mind, do yuh?"

"No-o-o, it's all right with me."

"Just walk in there, a minute or two before the stage is due to pull out, Len. All yuh have to do is tell them that the law is handlin' the stage for that trip. They can't refuse."

"They better not," said Shorty.

After they left the office, Len said soberly, "Shorty, I'd like to know more about Hartley and Stevens. After all, I'm the sheriff."

"What do yuh want to know, Len?"

"Anythin' yuh know, Shorty."

"Well, I don't know a lot, but I've heard plenty. Marsh, secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, told me plenty. He says he'd rather have Hashknife on a case than a dozen Sherlock Holmes. They've been together a long time, jist driftin' around, headin' for a new hill."

"A new hill?" queried Len. "What do yuh mean?"

"Well, yuh see," explained Shorty, "they want to see what's on the other side. Mebbe they think somethin' is wrong over there,

and they can fix it. They're great folks to fight for the under-dog."

"Then you think they're all right?" asked Len.

"All right? My Gawd, they're *jist* right, Len."

"Uh-huh. Well, I feel better about it. Yuh see, Hashknife has kinda taken things out of my hands. After all, I'm the sheriff. But if you say they're all right, I'll play the game with them—even if I don't know what kind of a game it is."

"I would, Len. Believe me, they're worth follow in'."

"Uh-huh. Well, I'll be out there myself, kinda lookin' around."

"You better keep yore head down," advised Shorty. "Them fellers know what they are doin'—even if it comes to throwin' lead. You don't want to ruin anythin' for 'em."

"I won't. But I'm the sheriff, Shorty."

"Yeah I know. In fact, you never let anybody forgit it. But even if yuh are, I'd trail Hashknife and Sleepy in the mornin'—and keep out of sight. A bullet never stops to look at a badge."

IT WAS an hour before daylight next morning when Hashknife and Sleepy rode out of Dry Forks. They checked up on Dean's room before they left, but he had not returned. No one saw them leave. The air was crisp, and the well-fed horses wanted to run.

"Been off a bronc for so long I've done forgot how to ride," remarked Sleepy.

"It'll come back to yuh," assured Hashknife, as they pounded along the old road to the Flying A.

The ranchhouse was close to the road, so they went past slowly, circled far around the dark group of buildings, and pulled up on the rim of a little mesa, about four hundred yards from the ranchhouse, where they dismounted.

"Just what are yuh lookin' for?" asked Sleepy, yawning and pulling his coat tighter.

"I don't know," replied Hashknife honestly. "It's only a hunch."

"That stage comes past here about eight o'clock," said Sleepy.

"Yeah."

Sleepy squatted down against a manzanita, keeping out of the wind, but Hashknife stood there, staring down toward the Flying A. A lantern bobbed across the yard, only a tiny light at that distance. It could mean that they were doing the chores early, but Hashknife had other ideas. He saw the light disappear. Probably went into the stable. Sleepy got up now, watching for the light again.

It was a few minutes before they saw it again, but this time Hashknife said:

"They're hitchin' up a team, Sleepy."

"Travelin' early, eh?"

"That's right."

False-dawn was creeping over the hills, and there was a little light now.

"They're takin' the wagon up to the house, Sleepy."

"Yeah. What have yuh got on yore mind, cowboy?"

"If that wagon don't head for Dry Forks, I've got plenty on my mind."

They watched it closely. The light was pretty bad, but they saw the equipage move away from the ranchhouses, out onto the main road and then turn to the right.

"It ain't headin' for Dry Forks," said Sleepy.

"C'mon, pardner — we're goin' to meet that wagon."

They mounted quickly and rode back through the brush, intending to swing around to their left to the main road, but cut an old road only a few yards from where they had been watching. The road ran east and west. They went ahead for a short distance, only to discover that the team and wagon had turned off the main road and was traveling toward them on the old road.

They quickly turned around and rode slowly back, following the road, keeping far enough ahead of the wagon for the driver not to see them. When they stopped, they could hear the wagon grinding and clucking behind them in the darkness.

Because of the darkness and the rough road, the wagon traveled slowly. The road led down into a deep swale, where the road turned to the left and proceeded up the swale, twisting back and forth in order to avoid deep washouts. It was getting lighter now, and they had to be more careful. They rode through a grove of sycamores, where they drew up and waited. The sunrise was painting the tops of the hills, as the wagon came creaking through the grove.

The driver was Grat McFee, his face

stripped with court-plaster, sitting, stony-faced on the wagon seat, the lines loose in his hands.

The plodding team was almost abreast of the two riders, before Grat McFee saw them. His eyes snapped wide, and like a ground-hog going into his hole, he dived off the seat, going over the left front wheel, head-first in the brush.

Hashknife spurred past the endgate of the wagon, his gun swinging high in his right hand. McFee, tangled in the brush, fired one shot, which tore a hole through Hashknife's shirt just below his left arm-pit, but before he could fire again Hashknife's bullet smacked him back against the brush, knocking him to his knees. For a moment he pawed for the gun he had dropped, but pitched forward on his face.

HASHKNIFE dismounted quickly and picked up McFee's gun. Sleepy had spurred in front of the frightened team, turning them against the brush.

"Are yuh all right?" he yelled at Hashknife.

"Yea-a-ah," drawled Hashknife, coming around the wagon. "That rooster was sure sudden. He darned near got me, too! Let's see what he was scared about."

There was some straw in the wagon-box, along with a pile of old canvas. They flung the canvas aside and looked down at Dean and Della La Plant, the singer. They were tightly roped separately, and then tied together back to back. In a few moments they had them cut loose. Dean had a discolored eye, a skinned nose and sizeable lump on his head, but the girl was unmarked. They both seemed confused, dazed, as they stared at Hashknife and Sleepy. But Dean recognized them and emitted a very weary whoop. The girl didn't seem to understand that they were safe.

"Where on earth are we?" asked Dean huskily, looking around at the trees and brush. "I—I don't remember much."

"Just what do yuh remember?" asked Hashknife.

"After I got that note from you—"

"Which I didn't write," interrupted Hashknife. "You went down the back stairs, and they jumped yuh."

"That's right—they did."

"I heard them talking," said the girl. "They were going to dump us in a hole."

"Why did they capture you?" asked Hashknife.

"They said she was a damn spying female," grinned Dean. "I heard that much, but I didn't know who they meant."

"They didn't talk to me," said Della.

"Did you two know each other, before yuh came here?" asked Hashknife.

"No, I didn't know her," said Dean. "What became of the driver? I heard two shots."

"He went away on the last one," said Hashknife quietly. "Miss Della, how'd they git you?"

She brushed the hair away from her smudgy forehead and said, "It was after the ten o'clock show, and we were starting to go upstairs, when one of the men whispered that someone wanted to see me outside the stage entrance. I—I went out there—and they grabbed me."

"Very playful folks," observed Sleepy dryly.

Hashknife and Sleepy loaded Grat McFee into the wagon and covered him with the tarpaulin. Sleepy drove the team, while Hashknife handled the two horses. They turned around and headed back toward the Flying A.

"How on earth did you know we would be taken away in a wagon?" asked Dean.

"Didn't," said Sleepy. "We was shootin' at a goose and hit the gander."

"I don't understand that, Sleepy."

"We was lookin' for somethin' else—and found this. How are yuh feelin', Miss Della?"

"I think I'm dreaming," she replied. "It just can't be real—except my sore arms, and legs. Those ropes were really tight. Do you think they would have killed us?"

"Well, I dunno," drawled Sleepy. "Grat McFee don't look like a feller who would git up that early in the mornin' to just give yuh a ride before breakfast. Yes'm, I really think he had ideas."

"I still don't see how you ever found out where to find us," said Dean.

"I didn't—Hashknife did," said Sleepy. "He's smart."

"And he has wonderful eyes," added Della.

Sleepy snorted. "Don't tell him—he's bad enough as he is, Ma'am."

Hashknife led the way almost to the spot where they could see the ranchhouse, and called a halt.

"You and the lady stay here—we've got some business that ain't quite finished," he said to Dean. "Here's McFee's gun. If anybody comes to bother yuh, start shootin'. Even if yuh can't hit anythin,' you can make a noise. We'll be back in an hour or so—we hope."

"I sure hope so, too," said Dean.

WHEN they came in sight of the ranchhouse they dismounted and led their horses. In this way they would not be visible from the house, due to the tall growth along the old road. They reached a point not far from where the old road intersected with the main highway to Oro Grande, when they jerked up short. Just ahead, standing against the brush, was a gray horse, its rider hunched against the brush on the opposite side of the road.

"Hyah, Len," said Hashknife quietly.

The sheriff of Dry Forks looked up quickly, but did not move.

"I figured you'd be around here, Hashknife," he said.

They went over and crouched beside him. Hashknife said, "We wasn't expectin' you, Len."

"After all," said Len, "I'm the sheriff, and I'd kinda like to know what's goin' on. How long you been here?"

"Oh, a while before daylight."

"Uh-huh. I fixed it up so that Shorty can drive the stage, and then I headed out here. But, damn it, I don't know what it's all about.

"I asked about that girl—over at the Ocotillo this mornin'. Nobody seemed to know. Yuh ain't got any idea where Dean is, have yuh?"

"Yeah," said Hashknife quietly. "Him and that girl from the Ocotillo are in a wagon, about a half-mile back on this old road."

Len stared at Hashknife for several moments.

"The hell they are!" he snorted. "In a wagon? Why—you ain't foolin'?"

"I ain't foolin', Len; they're in the wagon. Yuh see, I had to kill Grat McFee."

Len Hogue swallowed heavily and shook his head.

"Jist like that—he had t' kill Grat McFee—and I don't know why."

"He was takin' 'em up the canyon—aimin' to dump 'em in a hole, Len."

"Aw, my Gawd! Yuh say—wait a minute. I'm kinda goin' around in circles, Hashknife Grat McFee's dead. He was goin' to murder Dean and that girl. Yeah, I can figure that out—kinda. But how'd you know?"

"Oh, I just figured he was goin' out haulin' awful early for a feller that got all beat up last night. When he met us he went on the prod and dived off the wagon into the brush."

"I'll be damned! But what's the idea of Shorty drivin' the stage?"

"That's in the next chapter," smiled Hashknife. "Don't skip pages, Len."

"Yeah, I reckon I'll kinda let you do it, Hashknife. Mebbe I kinda like to be surprised."

SHORTY LANE climbed to the high seat of the stage that morning and picked up the lines. Jimmy Wilson, stage-office manager, leaned against a porch-post and squinted up at the deputy sheriff.

"You don't know what this is all about, Shorty?" he asked.

"Not me," replied Shorty, straightening out the long lines. "All I know is—I'm drivin' the stage."

"It's all right with me," said Wilson soberly. "You'll stop at the Flyin' A and pick up a passenger, along with his baggage."

"Uh-huh. Well, I'll be seein' yuh, Jimmy."

"Better drive up to the ranchhouse porch, Shorty. Might be a heavy trunk. It ain't out of yore way."

"*Adios, amigo,*" grinned Shorty. "I'm rollin'."

No one had explained to Shorty. All he knew was that he was driving the stage, and taking orders from Hashknife Hartley, it and when the tall cowboy showed up. Shorty was a good driver, and those four horses wanted action; so they laid a dust-screen between Dry Forks and the Flying A.

Shorty drove through the big gate at the Flying A, swung the team in a wide circle and stopped at the porch, where a trunk and two valises were stacked for shipment. Hobo Osborne came out, stopped short, staring at Shorty.

"When the hell did you start drivin' stage?" he asked.

"T'day," replied Shorty. "Terry's sick."

Shorty shot the brake on hard, wrapped his lines around it, and got down, yanking a long tie-rope off the top, as he slid down.

"Terry's sick, eh?" grunted Hobo.

"Yeah. Mebbe he won't live—I dunno. Help me with that trunk."

"Rustle yore own trunks," growled Hobo, and went back into the house.

Shorty grabbed the trunk and slid it down the steps. A horse and rider came in from the main gate and drew up at the porch. The rider was Monte Chavez, the boss gambler from the Ocotillo. It was the first time Shorty had ever seen Chavez on a horse.

"You must have stayed up all night, Monte," commented Shorty.

"Maybe I did," replied Chavez shortly, and went into the house.

"Well, well!" grunted Shorty, as he kneed the trunk up on the boot, and began roping it in place.

With the trunk lashed to his satisfaction he tossed the two valises up on top of the stage. Someone came out of the house, and Shorty turned to look into the muzzle of Hobo's Colt .45.

"He-e-ey! Look out with that hog-leg!" said Shorty. "Whatcha tryin' to do?"

"Yo're a liar!" said Hobo flatly. "Terry Alden ain't sick. What's the game, Shorty?"

"Game? I dunno of any game. Better put that damn gun down, Hobo."

"When I put it down—you won't see me do it! Come into the house."

The three men, crouched at the edge of the old road above the ranchhouse, saw Monte Chavez come to the ranch, and they saw Shorty Lane forced to go into the ranchhouse. Hashknife said:

"Somethin' went wrong, gents. C'mon. Leave the horses where they are."

WITH Hashknife leading the way they came straight toward the house, partly screened by an old shed and some trees.

Shorty walked into the house ahead of Hobo, who took his gun. In the main room he found Chavez, Steve Albright and Al Easton.

"Well!" exclaimed Shorty. "Looks like a meetin'."

"This is no time for smart remarks," said Albright. "Why did you drive the stage, Lane?"

"Yuh might ask the sheriff," suggested Shorty. "I'm followin' orders."

"Where is the sheriff?" asked Chavez quickly.

"Oh, he must be around some'ers," said Shorty calmly.

"Hobo, you better keep an eye out for Grat; he ought to be back," said Albright.

"He's been gone long enough," growled Hobo.

"Wait!" said Albright. "Go out and scout around the place. See if anybody is in sight. If they're not, you drive the stage to Oro Grande. All we want now is to get Al on that train."

"What about me?" asked Shorty soberly.

"You'll go along—as a passenger," said Albright, "until they get to the grades around El Diablo Canyon."

"That's a damn good idea!" blurted Hobo. "I'll take a look."

"I've got a better idea," said Easton. "Why not hitch up the buckboard team and trail the stage. At the El Diablo grades we can shift the trunk and valises to the buckboard and send the whole works over the edge. Then we can swear the stage never stopped here."

"Might work — unless we meet somebody," said Albright. "Anyway it's worth a try. I'll have Hobo hitch up, as quick as he gets back."

"I'm kinda amazed," said Shorty. "Goin' to all this trouble just on my account—and I don't know what it's all about."

Albright came over closer to Shorty. Albright's nerves were not so good just now. "I think you're a damn liar," he said.

"Much obliged, Steve. I'll remember that."

"You won't remember anything," said Albright. "Damn it, Hobo is taking a long time."

Hobo *was* taking a long time. He had come around the corner of the kitchen and run squarely against the muzzle of Hashknife's six-shooter. He was too shocked to even attempt a word or a move as Hashknife whispered, "You take his gun, Len. That's fine."

"Wh-what's the matter?" stammered Hobo. "Why, you—I—"

"That's right," smiled Hashknife, as

handcuffs clicked on the big, hairy wrists of Hobo Osborne.

"You was lookin' for somebody?" asked Len curiously.

"Don't worry about McFee, Hobo—he won't be ridin' home," said Hashknife.

Hobo's jaw sagged, as he stared at Hashknife. Perhaps he knew, without being told any more. His jaw shut tightly and he took a deep breath.

"I told Steve we'd have to get you," he muttered. "He thought he was too smart for you."

"There's a tough penalty for kidnapin'," said Hashknife. "They'll get you for kidnapin' that young feller in Oro Grande."

"That's once yo're wrong," replied Hobo. "That was Grat McFee."

"Much obliged," smiled Hashknife. "I wasn't sure it was either of yuh, Osborne."

There was a strained silence inside the house, as the men waited for Hobo to return. Then Chavez swore softly, and said, "I don't like it, Steve; he should be back. I'll take a look."

Chavez stepped out the front door and went quietly to a corner of the porch. Hashknife was coming down past the kitchen door. Chavez lifted his gun, and was knocked across the railing by a bullet from the gun of Sleepy Stevens, at the other corner of the house.

"And that," said Sleepy loudly, "endeth Monte Chavez."

"Much obliged, Sleepy," called Hashknife. "Watch that back door, Len!"

The frightened stage team was dancing and twisting, as Albright and Easton, unable to stand any further suspense, came dashing out. For a man of his age Albright was as agile as a monkey. He fairly leaped to the seat of the stage, while Al Easton was clawing his way up the side.

Albright had barely reached the seat, when he kicked off the brake. He didn't have the lines, as that team whirled around, entirely out of control, and headed straight for the fence. The stage bounded across a ditch, throwing Easton in a pin-wheel fall.

The running team swung to the right, blocked by the fence, but the stage crashed into the fence, rebounded on two wheels and turned over, burying Albright in a mass of wreckage, as the wheelers kicked themselves loose.

Hashknife, Sleepy, Len Hogue and Shorty Lane got down there as fast as possible. Al Easton was unconscious, so they devoted their time to digging Steve Albright loose. The tall, suave, owner-gambler had played his last card; the rolling stake had settled that question. They carried him up to the house, along with Al Easton. Monte Chavez was alive, but badly hurt.

They sent Shorty to town to get a doctor, and Sleepy went back to get the two young folks and the wagon. With Hobo Osborn shackled to a porch-post, Hashknife and Len relaxed.

"Maybe Hobo would like to talk," suggested Hashknife. "He seems to be the only voice left in the gang."

"Talkin' won't git me anythin'," growled Hobo.

"It might be the difference between a life sentence and a rope."

"Bull! You ain't got nothin' on me, High Pockets."

"Don't forget that Dean and Della are still alive. They can talk."

"What do yuh want to know?"

"Steve Albright was William Allison, wasn't he?"

"Yeah."

"And George Ellis, alias George Fox, was killed because Dean might recognize him, eh?"

"Recognize him for what?"

"For sellin' counterfeit mining shares to his father."

Hobo stared at Hashknife for a long time. "Fox," he said, "was killed because the Treasury Department was on his trail—and he'd talk."

"Who killed him?"

"Monte Chavez. Steve ordered him to do it. Steve was the boss."

"Then yuh searched his room, eh?"

"They didn't want anythin' lyin' around."

"The Treasury Department, eh?" mused Hashknife. "I didn't know that."

"Yuh didn't, eh? And you been runnin' around with one of their damned detectives—the feller that calls himself Dean Colt. We got tipped off on him. That's why we got him in Oro Grande. That girl is another."

"You mean that Dean and Della are Treasury operatives?"

"Jist as though you didn't know it!"

"Well, I'll be a sidewinder's sister!" exclaimed Len.

SLEEPY came back with the two dishevveled youngsters, leading his horse behind the wagon. He had told them everything, but they sat there, staring down at the casualties. Hashknife leaned against the wheel and looked up at them.

Then he shook his head, as he said, "Maybe I'm wrong, but you two don't look like detectives."

"Detectives?" parroted Dean. "What do you mean, Hashknife?"

"Hobo Osborne, the gent hitched to the post over there, says you are both detectives from the Treasury Department."

Dean turned his head and looked searchingly at Della.

"Are you?" he asked gently.

"I don't even know what it means," she replied.

"I know what it means," said Dean, "but it don't mean me."

"Yo're both lyin'," growled Hobo.

"I'm afraid that yore smart boss got a bad tip, Hobo," said Hashknife.

"It won't hurt him—where he's goin'."

Shorty brought the doctor, and it seems he also brought everybody else in Dry Forks who was able to get transportation. They crowded around and watched the doctor make his examination. They eyed Dean and Della, still on the wagon-seat, and examined the deceased stage-coach. Hashknife let Len tell them what happened. He and Sleepy didn't want any credit.

Hashknife didn't want the baggage opened. He asked Hobo what was in it and Hobo said: "I dunno everythin'. I know he was takin' the plates of the minin' stock and the ten-dollar plates. They buried the rest of the stuff. He was movin' to a new place, but I dunno where it was."

Hashknife drew Len aside and told him to hold the baggage, and wire the Treasury Department for men to come and take charge.

"Seal up the baggage and guard it," he told Len. "It's Government stuff, and we don't even want to handle it."

They loaded the trunk and valises on the wagon, and Shorty sat on the trunk all the way back to town. Tom Mallory, the prosecutor was excited, elated and entirely pompous. Hobo talked freely. He wanted to get as small a sentence as possible.

Hashknife and Sleepy went back to the hotel, cleaned up, secured their war-bags, and were ready to leave, when Dean and Della came to the door.

"C'mon in!" exclaimed Sleepy. "Still together, eh? Well, that's what a rope will do to yuh."

"We didn't come up to thank you," said Dean. "Words never can express how I feel toward you two. You know that. If it hadn't been for you, we'd both be dead long before this. Maybe I would never have reached Dry Forks. You have been wonderful to us."

"We didn't do anythin'," said Hashknife. "It was just a little slice of life, in which fate played a part."

"Fate?" queried Dean soberly. "Well, Mr. Fate, I want you to know that Della isn't going back to the Ocotillo, nor to any other stage. We—uh—well, you see—Della, you tell them."

"Do you have to be told, Mr. Hartley?" she asked.

Hashknife shook his head. "No-o-o, I don't reckon so."

"Love in a lumber-wagon!" exclaimed Sleepy. "And a long-legged Cupid with a six-shooter! Whooee-e-e"

"And," added the blushing Dean, "I talked with Mr. Mallory. He said that if my case was proved, I might get some of that money back, because Steve Albright left plenty money. Wouldn't that be great?"

"Great," agreed Hashknife. "I wish yuh both lots of luck."

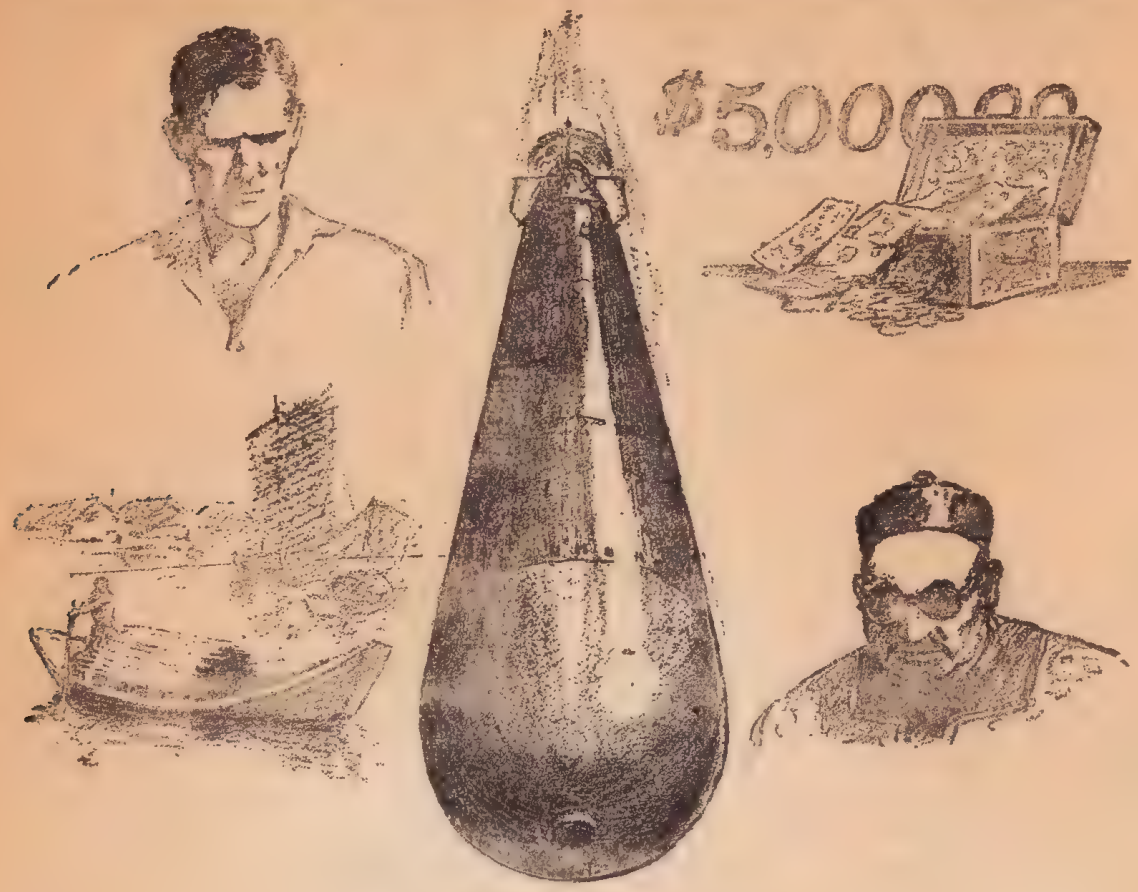
They went out, and down the stairs. Hashknife and Sleepy picked up their war-bags and went down the back stairs, where they had left their horses.

"Which way?" asked Sleepy, as they mounted.

"South, I reckon," replied Hashknife. "I was lookin' down there at the sunrise this mornin'."

"I seen 'em, too," said Sleepy. "Tall ones, all silver at the top. Yuh never can tell what we'll find on the other side of hills like them."

It Was Calcutta's History That Fantastic Things Did Happen



PICAROON

By GORDON MacCREAGH

PETER LEGRAND was descended, of course, from a previous Peter whose strong blood handed down a quite startling resemblance of himself to crop out every now and then in succeeding generations. We have a good description of that illustrious progenitor left by the good Doctor Esquemelling who gave us most that we know about the corsairs of the Caribee. Of Pierre Legrand, buccaneer, Esquemelling wrote:

"His appearance was alert and full of energy, tall and strong, straight brows that met above his eyes, hiding them beneath a vault of darkness; a noble and martial appearance."

Peter had inherited, besides appearance, something of the strong individuality and resolute acquisitiveness of Pierre the picaroon. So there was a little red tab against Peter's name in the card index that the Calcutta police tried rather hopelessly to maintain on the city's four thousand or so ever shifting and, many of them, shiftless white foreigners. Nothing very definite, but definitely a source of turbulence.

"You will remember, please," the Deputy Chief had told Peter with the acid politeness of British police officialdom, "that you are not in your own country and that *we* (emphasized) are a law-abiding people."

Peter didn't even remember what that first clash with British Indian officialdom had been about. Those that followed were a source of growing indignation on both sides.

Peter was in Calcutta because he was one of those expert American mechanics sent out

on foreign assignment and he had somehow managed to miss his ship, coming home. He had missed his ship because that strongly inherited individuality made him believe that he had an unalienable right to give himself one last chance to make a stake before coming home to enlist.

His hope to make a stake arose out of the chance that came along to buy a rickety boat shed and marine engine shop from the widow of a Chinese who had been killed in one of those hit or miss air raids that the Japanese sneaked over from their captured base at the all too-close Andaman Islands.

Peter's misfortune was that his machine shop was on the wrong side of the Hoogly River where only a Chinese could make any money out of it. On the Howrah industrial side—which would seem to be logical enough—but away down river amongst the mess of huts and gaudy native mansions and floating boat city of the three-quarter million of intermarried Chinese, Lascars, Malays, Hindus, what not, who swarmed with the productiveness and secrecy of rats and talked their more than forty unwritten languages. The police didn't even try to keep a record of that polyglot hive that Kipling called the City of Dreadful Night.

So Peter's chances of making his stake were looking pretty lean, even to his ebullient optimism — when he found the torpedo!

True to his heredity, the twisty back channels and mangrove creeks of Hoogly delta were an irresistible lure to Peter. He prowled them in his homemade launch for reasons no more criminal than the fascination of just beachcombing—and immediately made himself a suspicious character in the eyes of every security bureau in town.

He had found nothing so far, except the corpses of half-burned Hindoos that wallowed up and down the tides till the gavial crocodiles got them—and then he came upon the deadly thing.

That is to say, potentially deadly; for this one, Peter could see in a minute, had only a practise head. An escape, of course, from some naval maneuver, and that was why it had been set to float.

PETER surveyed the thing, the vaulted darkness of his eyes pin-pricked with little lights. A government torpedo, he knew well enough, even with a harmless practise head, was dynamite. Unusable, utterly unsalable and a danger to possess. But never could it enter the mind of a Peter Legrand just meekly to give up a treasure trove. To himself he said:

"Guess there ought to be something more in this than the paltry official reward for return—if a guy would lay low and bide his time."

So Peter lay low. He waited till black of night and then he towed the thing to the yet blacker interior of his boathouse that staggered drunkenly over the forever greasy water befouled by the uncountable shifting fleet of native *sampans*. And there he shackled the trouble-laden thing to an old engine so rusted that even a native wouldn't buy it and he softly sank it.

"I wonder," he murmured to himself. "I wonder if I've gotten away with it so far?"

He was expressing a hope rather than a surmise; for he knew just as well as did the baffled police that in places where the polyglot peoples swarm the only secrets are those that they chose to keep themeslves. So Peter slept that night in his launch and he was not surprised to wake up presently and to sense that the soft lapping of the water was more than just the normal slap of scummy wavelets against his hull.

He inched to his companionway and, before sticking his head out, he reached his hand to feel around at deck level for any possible feet waiting on tip toe with a billet of wood poised. There were none.

"Amateurs," Peter told himself and he lifted himself out with his two hands on the hatch coaming.

The black water lapped as stealthily as a snake at the cat's milk bowl and presently, like a snake, a long, soft breath exhaled from the bubbles. Not by sight, but by sound of the wavelets against hollow wood, Peter knew that a small *sampan* was close by—and likely enough a man in it holding it, besides the diver who breathed in the water. Peter gauged the *sampan's* position and jumped for it.

Oriental ingenuity contrives to build *sampans* without any thwarts to hold their shape—possibly because they don't have to have any shape, just so they float. Peter landed, therefore, full and fair on the single floorboard that makes a walk for the boatman who rows standing and facing forward. A startled yelp let go and, amateur or no,

the man had no doubt about the right thing to do. Peter felt the thud of a hard swung wrist against his side and with it the hot sear of a knife along his back.

Peter had his own wide experience about what to do in almost any circumstance dealing with boats. He heaved his weight down on the boat's gunwale and gratefully felt the tepid water surge in and turn it over. He trod water, listening.

A hand closed over his face, driving its heel hard under his nostrils, the fingers clawing for his eyes. Peter clamped the hand in both his, turned his shoulder under it and heaved down. He felt the hideous crunch of the elbow, heard the anguished yelp. And then there was that other wrist again, thudding blind and vicious against his head, the knife just an inch too far back. Peter dived, groping for legs. He got none.

When the air was bursting in his lungs he rose softly. Only the splash of swimmers at his boathouse entrance came to him. He got his hands on his own gunwale and heaved himself in one adroit motion to a sitting position on the deck.

From bumping *sampans* outside, sleepy voices came questioning in half a dozen languages,

"Aw, shut up," Peter growled. "Nothing's the matter. Only pirates."

The voices made the clucking noises of drowsy water fowl, muffled beneath their miserable jute sack covers. Peter twisted his back wryly.

"Dynamite it is, by golly! And so I'm out a little blood and in about three dollars' worth of *sampan*—so far. Guess there'll be more."

There was. At the morning ceremonious hour-of-the-pigeon when people might with propriety make calls, a pleasant-faced young Chinese stood in the dimness of Peter's boathouse runway. He placed both his hands within his wide sleeves and bowed. That is to say, he dressed like a Chinese man of business in black embroidered gown and felt shoes, he acted like a Chinese; but he spoke a perfect mission English. He said:

"Permit me to introduce myself. I am Ting Fu. Sir, how do you do?"

Peter hauled in on his stern line. He checked.

"I suppose you give your word on the ancestors' graves that you have no gun?"

Ting Fu's smile was as childlike and bland as Bret Harte's innocent Heathen Chinee. He said:

"The ancestor oath is quite unmodern. But since you are very definitely not a policeman, why lie to you?"

Peter, his face as expressionless as a lignumvitae block, hauled on in.

"Well, don't try any juggling tricks with it. You want to talk business, come on aboard and I'll get a tea going."

Ting Fu's clever little eyes disappeared in his smiles.

"So delightful to do business with a man who understands. And, allow me, I come prepared." He produced from his sleeve a tiny basket enclosing a packet of crimson paper tied with yellow silk thread. "A little gift to mellow our conversation, a tea of the thousand flowers. You Americans drink such impossible tea."

"Hmh!" Peter grunted. "So you know something about me?"

"Everything," the guest smiled.

Modernity cannot entirely subdue the conventions of five thousand years. The conversation, therefore, drifted around and back from the weather to the waterfront to the latest Japanese raid, and yellow man agreed heartily with white man that those little devils would get the almighty hell beaten out of their kimonos as soon as white machinery could supplement yellow's myriad manpower over the new Ledo road; and from that the talk turned to the difficulty of making an honest living through this madness that exerted its merciless priority on everything. Till at last came the pregnant silence out of which Ting Fu said in the most casual tone:

"When the wolf found a dead elephant he was glad of the lion's assistance to eat it."

"Aa-ah!" said Peter. "The lion must be very, and quite foolishly, hungry these nights."

Ting Fu was Orientally shamelessly apologetic. "It was in truth a hasty and ill-planned attempt. I was not consulted."

"It wasn't a good way to get asked to cut in on a meal. Suppose the wolf would be mad about getting his hide slashed and wouldn't invite?"

Ting Fu's round face beamed on him like a yellow moon. Peter got the feeling that the man was as coldly inhuman as though

he had come from there. He softly bore out the judgment.

"The lion can take."

"Oh, yeah?" Peter's creed of to have and to hold rose in belligerent assertiveness. "He'll have to try a lot tougher than last night. Now you don't look such a shell of a taking lion to me."

"Oh, no, no, no, no, Not I." Ting Fu pushed the thought away from himself with both hands. "I am only an agent. The lion is"—his lowered voice gave weight to the name—"Wang Ch'in Wu!"

"Oh ho-o-o! The devil you say!"

EVERYBODY knew Wang Ch'in Wu. Under the impartial rule of Pax Britannica more than one Oriental of more than one race has made his million in Calcutta. Everybody knew the fat embodiment of Chinese opulence, driving in a shiny monster of a car to the Maiden to beam through thick spectacles upon the endless England v. Australia cricket matches, visiting the race track to bet lavishly and lose and bet again with the carelessness that popularized him with a sporting people; even though always aloofly through the hands of his agents, for the man himself spoke no English.

Everybody knew these surface ostentatious activities; but nobody knew much else. Wang's business was as obscure as every Oriental loves to make it. He belonged to none of the trade *hongs*—it was supposed because he was a Northerner from Peiping while nearly all the Chinese in Calcutta were Cantonese who spoke an entirely different language. If he belonged to anything it would be some of the secret societies that baffled the police more than ever a Chinatown tong worried an American detective squad.

Peter knew about the potentate because he knew his motor yacht. Right from his own humble dock he could see the ornately gilded boathouse that sheltered the craft. Fifty-three feet of sleek speed and power, he used to see it go roaring up and down the river on no apparent business. Peter's own base suspicion was something lucrative in narcotics; something just a little too orientally sly for white man police. But nowadays the boat lay ensconced in its house behind huge doors so permanently closed that *sampans* used their pilings for a tie-up place.

So Peter breathed a long, Oh-ho-o-o, and said, "Yes, a lion indeed. What does he want with it?"

Ting Fu's eyes opened to owlish impressiveness. "Since you, too, are a lone wolf who does things his own way, I will not lie. The Lion is a patriot"—and to the skepticism in Peter's narrowed eyes he quickly added something more reasonable. "Moreover, his business has been ruined by Japanese capture of Thailand whence used to come opium."

"Aha!" Peter chuckled. "I thought so."

"Therefore," Ting Fu's eyes glowed with fervor, "with such a thing as you possess and with his fast boat the Lion would make a dash to the Andaman Islands where are many big Japanese supply ships for Rangoon."

"He's mad," said Peter.

"He has a vengeance to take; and, more important, face must be saved."

"He's still mad. What about British river patrols?" And there's some units of the fleet holed up below Garden Reach bend."

Ting Fu only smiled and shrugged. "*You* know that the channels of the Hoogly delta are a thousand."

Peter shrugged in his turn. "You make it sound almost convincing. Only, here's a jolt for you. The thing is harmless. A practise head."

Ting Fu remained as serene as a moon. "A war head can be—acquired."

"Oh, yeah?" Peter began again; but he changed it to a grunt. Where an army of Orientals with little inducement to patriotism worked under sparse white supervision in the great naval shops of Howrah, fantastic things could happen. It was Calcutta's history that fantastic things did happen.

"What about the off-shore mines?" Peter saw another difficulty.

Ting Fu sipped daintily at his tea. "Plans of mine fields my friend, are much easier to acquire than heavy marine equipment. Only the most sanguine white man would hope that a people as clever as the Japanese do not acquire each new change of plan; and we, I assure you, are quite as clever as the Japanese."

"Huh! Yes, damn 'em. I suppose, with Calcutta's mess of mixed races, appearance or accent don't mean a thing. The native staff of every government office must be riddled like a *sampan* with teredos. That's

one of the chief difficulties about any naval raid on Rangoon."

"Oh, but surely, my dear sir." Ting Fu giggled with all the complacence of a natural born conspirator people that knows how to outwit a lordly race of superior beings.

Peter frowned at him from his dark vault of contemplative eyes. "Well," he said at last. "He sure is monkeying with dynamite; but that's none of my business. And since he knows about it and God knows what else, this thing is too hot to hold. What's the Lion's price for a dead elephant?"

"Five hundred dollars."

Peter laughed. "That's the kind of piking money that keeps men honest. You tell your lion, no dice. I'll turn it in to the authorities and win myself a few good marks in the police file."

"You will not be such a— You dare not. You have already held it too long without report." Ting Fu's suave full moon confidence was transformed to the round stare of some nocturnal rodent, utterly incapable of comprehending a human of this sort.

Peter nodded at him, grinning. "I'll take a chance on Virtue bringing in that old advertised reward."

Ting Fu came out of his trance as suddenly as a rodent that has made up its mind to human menace. He slipped his right hand into his left sleeve and pointed the elbow close and straight at Peter's stomach. His lips were drawn back tight to show even little protuberant teeth.

"You will raise your hands above your head. You will very carefully make no outcry while I tie you up."

Peter slowly raised his big hands high, fingers spread and empty. He could see Ting Fu's eyes alertly follow the motion.

"Amateur." Peter said and from well below the other's line of vision he kicked out sudden and hard at his groin.

A retching grunt fetched from the man. The gun didn't even go off before Peter's decoy hands were on Ting Fu's arms, wrenched them apart. The one big hand held him with a fistful of wrist and blouse front while the other slapped him across the round cheek, back handed him on the return and slapped him again. Slapped him loose jawed and groggy. Peter held him so, poised for the kill. Then the ferocity blinked out of his eyes as suddenly as it had come and he was grinning.

"A sleeve holster," he said, "is an improvement that Western dress precludes." He jerked the gun out. "Ho! A British Webley! 'Acquired,' I suppose, like your smooth people know how." He shoved Ting Fu from him. The man lurched, shaky and gasping, against the support of the cabin housing.

"Listen," Peter told him. "Your boss's business nor his private vengeance are none of my affair. I'm in this world to make a good living for Peter Legrand. So go tell your Lion, if he wants this thing bad enough to send a gunman for it, he'll have to talk business, not pocket money. I'll be here to listen to him. To himself, not his jackal."

He hauled his boat in to the catwalk. He pointed Ting Fu ashore with the gun. "And tell him, before dark. Come sunset, I'm taking no more chances with his pirate gang. I'll go good citizen and turn the thing in to the authorities."

Ting Fu blundered from the boathouse without looking back.

Peter grinned hardily after him. "I wonder," he said. "I wonder now, if I dast wait till dark?"

And with that he rummaged out a pipe, lit it and drew long ruminative breaths. He assured himself that the Webley was loaded, took his own gun from the holster nailed just inside the cabin doorway and he answered his own question by sitting down to wait. But he kept his head carefully below the line of the deck coaming.

IT WAS well before dark when footsteps shuffled over the bamboo slats of his catwalk. It was Ting Fu again, sulky and unwilling, but under orders that he dared not disobey. Peter warily hauled his boat's stern close.

"I told you I wanted the big shot himself. But come aboard and I'll hear his excuses."

Ting Fu scowled malevolence and mumbled through puffed lips. "Wang Ch'in Wu is a marked man. Everyone knows what he does. He cannot appear in this personality. But he sends an offer."

"Always heard your Lion was pretty royally exclusive and wouldn't talk to folks. Fell, how much does he raise his ante over five hundred dollars?"

"Five thousand dollars!"

Peter's breath sucked in. "Oh-ho-o-o! Now that's the kind of money that turns politi-

cians into leading citizens. That could persuade my conscience it didn't care a hoot whether the British Lion fires off its torpedo officially or Lion Wong personally, so long as it goes to the right place. But no monkey talk. Cash."

"Cash money will be paid upon completed delivery."

"Ho! No tickee, no washee, eh? Well, that's the Chinese way of doing business. What's he call completed delivery?"

"Inside his boathouse and alongside his ship."

"Okay. I can do that tonight."

Ting Fu turned sulky eyes up to Peter and allowed himself a sour smile.

"It is not so easy. So much money must yet be earned. The weapon, as it lies, is useless. Wang Ch'in Wu cannot afford to be caught with it. You are an expert mechanic. Parts can be acquired and supplied to you. You will assemble the thing here. You will deliver it complete and ready to go."

"Oho!" Peter's brows drew together and his eyes burned through the thought. "A right smooth lad, this Wang. That's why he's where he is. Anybody gets caught, even if he squeals, the big shot remains in the clear; no evidence against him. Well, that's good politics. So I take all the chances, eh?"

"Five thousand dollars!" Ting Fu whispered it. "And the chances are none that a bold man will not take. A couple of—coolies—will be supplied to your outer shop. A couple of vegetable peddlers' *sampans* will see that no sudden interference comes from the water side. You are so smart yourself—"

His complimentary grin snarled his lips back from his teeth. "You can arrange that the—elephant corpse—will sink immediately upon warning."

"Hm-mm-m!" Peters eyes pinched down while he looked at Ting Fu and through him and on through the drooping wall of his boathouse. Till the reckless devil that was the soul of buccaneer Pierre Legrand began to peer out from the vault of the hereditary brows. "Five thousand, huh? That's a stake all right; and I could get out of this pesthole and serve my country without feeling I'd have to go fishing for a job with all the other millions when this fuss is over." His head began to nod in long, slow moves. "I'd likely need blueprints of war head assembly."

"Torpedo assembly is hardly even a secret. drawings will be the easiest part."

"Golly! The thing sure is loaded with trouble. Or"—the devil laughed out with big strong teeth—"it will be when I'm through with it. All right. Tell him I'll gamble. No tickee, no washee. I'll do the work and Wang supplies all material. Shoplifting of parts is out of my line."

Ting Fu's lips soured over the innuendo. But he said only, "It will take perhaps a week for the first pieces to begin to come in. See that you are prepared. You will from now on not leave your shop. Food will be brought to you here. You will make all communications through me." He spoke with the arrogance of a big shot's henchman handing out orders to the gang's newest recruit.

Peter's brows contracted down on him and then he grinned wide amazement. He jerked the boat's stern in, took the henchman by arm and baggy pant and slung him onto the catwalk.

"You still don't understand," he said.

Ting Fu chittered down at him, near-white and quivering so that the bamboo slats rattled.

"If you ever lay your brute hands on me again," he promised. "I will kill you."

Peter still laughed. "Not until your boss gets his new toy and don't need me any more, you won't try it. 'Cause I've an idea your Lion treats his jackals rough—and that again is why he's where he is."

Ting Fu, a sullen moon in eclipse, left him.

Peter laughed after him; and then his brows frowned down to contemplate a phenomenon. "Queer little mink. Chinese are mostly accustomed to getting kicked around. Must be a scion of some big name family."

PETER spent the week of waiting in reading up about torpedoes. He was appalled first at the intricacy of a weapon that required a great reservoir of highly compressed air to supply oxygen to a fuel-burning engine—he had had a naive layman's idea that the thing ran on compressed air alone. The complicated gadgets that automatically governed depth and gyroscopic steering frightened him. And then he was amazed at the ingeniously sturdy construction that kept all those working parts water-

tight and oiled and safe until the thing's own explosion would blow them, along with with whatever it struck, to smithereens.

"Hell," he murmured his awestruck conclusion. "All I've got to do is recharge the air pressure tank and put together an explosion head, and the devilish little thing is fit to sink the biggest battleship the Japs own. All he's got to do is know how to set its course and depth and the gyro'll do all the rest."

Peter spent a part of his week rigging an ingenious arrangement of his own for the disposal, as Ting Fu warned, of the "corpse." Ingeniously simple to the point of genius. He laid a light haul-out track from his shop bank right into his boathouse and he built a little cradle that would serve as a work bench for the thing as well as slide on the track. Outside of his boathouse he found, coincidentally enough, that the usual desultory gathering of *sampans* had moved. There remained only three idle boats with dingy assortments of vegetables in a condition that anywhere else would be considered as garbage. Their occupants, burly and surly, only stared at him.

Peter grunted cynical understanding. "Two-way warning signal set-up. One of 'em in case I should consider a getaway with Wang's good material on a double-cross deal. That bird takes no chances." But he paddled his confiscated *sampan* out with a sheave block and rope and a sackful of assorted weighty junk. To the nearest guard boat he gave orders.

"Come dark, you dive and make fast this block to that piling. Down deep, savvy?"

If the men had been honest peasantry they would have understood no word of English, and no harm done. But they stared hard-eyed and said, "Can do."

Peter fastened the other end of his rope to the tail of his tin fish. At the first hint of interference a heave and a push would softly suck it down under his boathouse doors and out to its snug anchorage well beneath the scummy surface.

In Calcutta boat yards, machine shops, any place where there might be tools or anything else that may lightly be picked up, are equipped with massive doors that can be locked. Peter saw to it that his doors locked with an iron bar.

A pair of sturdy coolies showed up and said that they had come to work. Their profession, they stated stolidly, was doorkeeper and watchman.

One morning one of them silently handed Peter a package wrapped in banana leaves. It might have been food. It was a brass gadget with a plunger nose that anybody could recognize as a detonator.

Peter chuckled his cynical amazement. "And there's innocent housewives in Calcutta that think they can prevent sneak thievery by the underpaid servant."

Ting Fu came shuffling gingerly. Like a *long-tak-sam* magician he produced from his voluminous gown little oblong packets.

"TNT," he whispered as though his very breath vibrations might do some fearful thing. How much will you need?"

"Five hundred pounds," Peter knew from his intensive study.

"Ay-yah!" moaned Ting Fu. "May the gods preserve me!" But there was a hitch, Ting Fu reported. "A war head casing has been—acquired; the most difficult thing of all. It is a bronze shell large enough to contain all the explosive. We dare not take the risk of transporting it through the town. You must go in your boat. Down along the shore towards Garden Reach. Keep close in. Somewhere from the mangroves a coolie will signal to you. You can edge in and pick it up. If you are hailed by a patrol you can of course sink it."

"A sweet job you've picked for me. Daylight too, since there's no running around the lower river in a boat these nights. Is your crowd getting cold feet?"

"Five thousand dollars!" Ting Fu grinned sourly at him. "They must be earned."

So Peter backed his boat out and the garbage peddlers only stared stonily. In open innocence Peter chugged along; past malarious huts on stilts over the mud flats, past millions of *sampans* all jumbled with the higgledy-piggledy collection of high-freeboard, gaff-headed ketches, owned by half the races of the East and painted as garishly; past the last scattering of outlying huts to where the mangrove tangles spread out over unreclaimed swamp.

Peter cruised slowly, close in. Farther out a navy launch raced on some errand. Peter scanned every jungly inlet. No furtive coolie yet. Peter rounded Garden Reach bend. Over a low sandbar he could see the low concrete dome of an emergency airport. Other jungle-covered domes he knew must

be the camouflaged emplacements of huge coast defense guns. Beyond them rose the spidery masts of British warships. Peter's wary eyes could just pick out those of the monster super-dreadnaught that rumor said was no other than the H. M. S. *Thunderer,* the mightiest fighting ship of the Far Eastern fleet, waiting for the day when, with other American units, it would converge on Rangoon.

"Well, migod!" he said. "It can't be any closer than this." He turned and cruised slowly back. And there suddenly was a coolie in skimpy *dhotie* and rag turban poking about amongst the roots and gathering mangrove oysters.

"Ha!" Peter edged his boat in. But whether the man was his man or whether he had anything for him he never found out. For a voice hailed him from farther inshore, high and imperious.

"'Alt there, 'oever you are. You there in the boat, I mean."

Peter couldn't follow how; but the native simply disappeared. A white soldier in sun helmet and khaki shorts came splashing out into the shallows. Two others converged in on Peter. The first beckoned him to come in close. All three waded out waist deep and laid hands on the boat as though to arrest it. They were apologetic, though.

"I sye, chum. Yer cawn't bloomin' well do this, yer know. Wot yer got in this 'ere boat?"

Peter swallowed the tenseness of his throat.

"Do what?" he said. "And I've got nothing." He almost said the, "Thank the Lord," aloud.

THE men craned to look into the boat. One of them climbed muddily in and rummaged unlikely places with the futility of one unfamiliar with boats.

"'E seems all righto. But—" The men looked at one another doubtfully. "Sorry, chum; but we'll 'ave to tyke yer to the orficer of the patrol."

Peter's innocence sat on him like a beatitude. "Good thing you fellows didn't happen along a couple minutes later."

"Why?" All three fired the question at him with the crassness of men trained, not to think, but to take orders.

"I'd have been gone," said Peter with an expression as brassy as a binnacle.

"Well, yer aye'nt goin' no plaice for a while," was the military retort. "You're comin'."

Peter shrugged. He took a line out to the nearest mangrove root and went with the soldiers to find an officer. The officer asked questions and came and looked at the boat from dry land and asked more questions and finally he passed the buck.

"Well, this doesn't look to be a military case. Call up the civil police and give it to them."

So in due time a car came and took Peter straight to headquarters. There the desk sergeant said:

"Oh! Here again, what?"

Peter, secure in his innocence, said, "Listen. I've got a boat marooned out there that somebody's responsible for."

So the police asked more questions—or rather, the same questions all over again, and they could find nothing to pin onto Peter any more than could the military; and, exasperated, they told him:

"You be glad we don't jolly well frame up something on you, like could happen to you in your own country. And you better walk softly, me lad, or perhaps we will, for the nuisance that you are. And, while we're at it, lemme warn you not to go stirring up trouble with British subjects. We already have a complaint about starting a fuss with Wang Ch'in Wu."

Peter's grinning complacence vanished in a long drawn-in breath.

"Who made any such complaint? About what?"

"Wang lodged it himself; assaulting one of his servants."

"Why, the dirty double—" Peter bit back what might have been an injudicious outburst. "So Mister smart guy Wang put himself on record as having a fuss with me? Ve-ery smart. Just in case I would; so he could come running and swear I had it in for him, and anything I'd say would be just spite and lies."

"We don't know Wang Ch'in Wu's motives," said the Police. "Nobody does. But if you want to lay any counter charge for your own protection we must, in justice, book it."

"No," said Peter, and he was able to grin

again, though his lips were tight. "No, thank you. I don't lay any charges any place. I roll my own."

The police didn't understand that; so they repeated: "Well, you just walk soft and careful, me lad." And they let him go.

But the next morning early one of the door-guarding coolies scuttled chattering to whisper, "One p'licee man is come!"

Peter slashed a knife through a restraining rope, gave a shove, and his *corpus delicti,* cradle and all, swished softly down the track into the water. Peter's voice covered any possible noise, shouting:

"All right there. Open up, fool. Don't keep the police waiting."

But it was only a tall, curly bearded Sikh from the native force with a message for Peter to say that his boat was at the police dock and he'd better come and get it out of the way.

Peter let go his breath through distended nostrils. He murmured, "Got to hand it to these Lymie cops. They *are* impartial."

That night the torpedo head casing was quietly delivered by *sampan.* Peter didn't waste time with foolish questions to the stolid boatman. He waited for Ting Fu to show up in the morning.

When Ting arrived Peter didn't ask any questions either. He took him by a fistful of blouse front and dragged him close and told him things, growling.

"Listen you. All this monkey play makes me think your slick Mr. Wang is figuring out a double cross."

It was Ting who asked questions. "What do you mean? What monkeys?"

Peter shook him. "Don't act monkey yourself. That complaint to the cops to establish bad blood; that was a plant; it's an old Oriental trick. But that head casing; that was a smart one. It could have been delivered by *sampan* anyway. So why did I have to go out in my boat? I'll tell you why. You never intended for me to meet up with any coolie in the mangroves; there was never anybody there with any casing. All you ever intended was that I'd be picked up there and put on record as snooping around. Just another bit of planted evidence to leave me holding the bag. And, by God!" Peter shook the little man again. "Damned if I don't believe now that somebody telephoned in and reported a suspicious-acting boat. Otherwise those Tommies would ha' never seen me. They were on the watch, that's what."

Ting Fu gave up trying to shake free from Peter's hand. He didn't even try to explain away anything. He resorted to the one conclusive argument.

"But, Mister Peter, my dear sir. Five thousand dollars you will be paid for any little inconvenience that you suffer."

"Five thousand dollars is plenty of hard money," Peter growled. "And to me it means home. That's why I'm standing for things that Momma never thought her little boy would. But how do I know I won't be fan-tanned out of it?"

"I assure you, Mister Peter; I promise you, you will be honestly paid. Another week now, and the thing should be ready for delivery and you will be rich."

"Who says? Only *you* say. You tell me that big shot Wang Ch'in Wu wants this thing. Have I any word from Wang?"

Ting Fu looked blank.

"All right. So I'm going and beard Wang right in his royal castle."

Ting Fu struggled again to push away from the disastrous thought.

"Ho! Can't I?"

"But you cannot do that."

Ting Fu was on surer ground now. He relaxed and let his little teeth show.

"You would be stopped first at the outer gate; and if you could bull through there you would be stopped at the door, and if you could bull through that," the teeth clicked minkishly, "you would quite possibly never come back." And he added the conclusive codicil, "Moreover, you dare not make an outcry. The record is not good about you." The clever little eyes closed to thin lines. "And finally, you are in a work that cannot stand any publicity."

Peter's scowl, if Ting Fu had not been sweating wet, could have burned him. Slowly, the big hand opened and let him go. Peter had to admit it grudgingly:

"Your slick partner has sure dealt himself all the cards. Well," he shrugged, "I've gambled so far and I'll gamble the deal through."

"So I promise you you will be rich." Ting Fu still showed his teeth in the fixed mask expression of making a smile and—he was now beyond immediate reach of

Peter's inexorable hand. "I remind you of another promise. You have again laid your brute hands on me."

Peter's scowl slowly passed to a hard appreciation. "Determined little devil, aren't you? Me, too. So you go tell Mister slick Wang I'm not a man who gets double crossed. And tell him I'm going to see him, I don't care how exclusive."

Ting Fu's laugh was a noise like a cat spitting.

PETER worked the week through in a permanent scowl. Little banana-leaf-wrapped bits of tooled metal quietly came and evil little oblong packets in horrid quantities. Till at last the deadly machine was loaded and ready. Peter eased it gingerly into the dimness of his boatshed. Gingerly because, though he knew it was safe enough until the detonator safety cap could be slipped, there was a hellish potentiality to the thing that could catch at any man's nerves. Monkeying with dynamite! Only this was worse, T. N. T. The thing floated, evil even in its passivity.

Ting Fu was quivering with excitement.

"You say it does not have to be shot from a tube? The speed of a fast boat is enough?"

"Not even that. It can be dropped overboard; just like from a plane. All it needs is to set a little dial for direction and depth; the innard gadgets hold it true."

Ting Fu, squatting froglike at the motor boat's gunwale, gloated over it. "It is beautiful, no? It can sink the biggest ship. Wang is ready. I have reported successful completion. He will take delivery tonight. He is in his boat, waiting."

Peter, waist deep in water, looked up quickly. "Oh, he is? In plenty of a hurry, isn't he?"

Ting Fu nodded eagerly again. "Face must be saved to maintain honor before all his countrymen, and it has waited too long already."

Peter stooped to peer under his boathouse wall. Over the water he could see the big shot's ornate shed, coldly silent. But it was noticeable that the *sampans* that clustered about its pilings had been driven away.

"He sure is all set." Peter hoisted himself aboard. He was grinning tightly. "No tickee, no washee, eh? That cuts two ways."

Ting Fu shrank away as though the hard edge to Peter's tone could cut him.

"What do you mean?"

"I told you I was not a man to be double crossed. So I'll show you." With a sudden long reach he clapped his hand over Ting's mouth. Expertly and like handling a doll, he gagged him. "Just so *you* won't make an outcry," he said easily. "And just so you won't get into monkey mischief while I'm away—" He neatly tied the squirming arms and legs and attached the bundle to the engine flywheel.

"No tickee, no washee. I've played his game nice and good so far; and now I'm going to play my own. One smooth double cross is as many as any but a fool will chance. I've got what he wants and he's got what I want; so *you* say. So I'm going over and see Mister exclusive Wang."

Ting Fu's eyes were a boggling terror.

Peter got into the confiscated *sampan* and strongly sculled across the water. The garbage peddler guards, with no direct orders about *sampans*, only babbled.

"Shut up!" Peter growled at them. He went on. The tide, he had seen, was low enough so that he could push the *sampan* right under Wang's shed doors. His purposeful arrival caused a consternation and a sudden flurry of Oriental aimlessness; a confusion and a chattering and belated fierce threats to get away—or else. But all in guarded hush-hush. A truculent deck guard pointed a pistol at him.

"No," said Peter. "Nobody is making any outcry or noise at this stage of the deal." He made his boat fast and swung himself up to the deck. "Now then, gorillas, where's the boss?"

He didn't need to ask. He could see the great man in the midships glass cabin. For a moment the fat face glared a distorted rage through the glass at the intrusion on his careful seclusion; and then he threw up his hands to accept a situation that could not be altered without a fight that this grim white man looked to be capable of raising to the uproar of battle.

His face oozed into fat smiles and he signed to a crouching menial to let Peter in. Ponderously esconsced in a chair, he did not rise, but he inclined his head to signify that he presented an ear.

"That's fine, Mister Wang," said Peter.

"I knew you'd see sense when you had to. So now we'll talk business. All I've had so far is second-hand promises from your agent."

Wang did not speak good mission English. He said, "Oah, you mean thee monee?"

"Nothing else but," said Peter. "That's what I'm eating dirt for. Cash on delivery."

Wang smiled fatly. "Oah, I be ready with monee awright."

"I've seen nothing yet," said Peter doggedly.

"Veree good," said Wang. "I show you if you rike."

Peter's head jerked up.

"Huh? You what?"

"I show." Wang signed to the servant. The man brought a teakwood box. Wang dangled a key. The man opened up the box. Wang smiled the supercilious unction of a man who proves his honesty.

"You see? Fi' thousan' dorrar. I keep promise. Cash for derivery."

Peter was breathing heavily through his nose. He was staring, not at the money but at the man and he was seeing neither. He was looking inside his own mind, and, quite dizzily, at a lot of things there he had not seen before. He was able to blurt out at last:

"By God, yes! Yes, it sure looks like five thousand."

Wang seemed to enjoy a poor man's confusion in the presence of wealth. "Ho-ho! Prenty monee, no? Awright, you bring, I pay."

Peter was having difficulty in breathing in that stuffy glass cabin. He was glad to get out, as from a lethal chamber. Looking back, he saw the servant scuttle out and run forward. As he lowered himself to his *sampan* he saw the man excitedly chattering to two of the gorilla deck guards, saw them cautiously turn, not their heads, but their hard little eyes toward himself.

HE SHOVED under the great doors and sculled to his own lop-sided shed as though he had been interviewing the devil and lucky to get away. Back in his own cabin, the question that stared from his prisoner's eyes was a dark horror.

"Yeh," Peter told him. "You're right. At last I've *heard* him talk. And now you hear me." Peter's eyes under his vaulted brows were grimmer than Ting Fu had ever seen them yet. "I'm telling you things that I've just understood. I've just understood how much of a fool I can be. But now I know. Your big shot has remained exclusive because a Chinee can't very well pronounce an R and he has to say, velly good, pletty nice."

Peter's lips curled away to show his teeth, but not in a grin. "Sounds silly, doesn't it? But your sheer funk shows me I'm right. Conversely there's no L in the Japanese language and a Jap has to make 'em all R's. A Jap says—'If you *rike*, I show you.' He says—'Fi thousan' dorrars'! Restricting himself to Chinese in this mix-up of languages here he could get away with it as a North China man, as a Malay breed, as anything. Same as you do, eh? But speaking English is his give-away. He's lost."

Ting Fu writhed in his bonds.

"So he wants a torpedo. Why? I'll tell you why. So he can run up the shore line, same as I did, and round the Garden Reach corner and let go slam into the British fleet! H.M.S. *Thunderer!* And all he needs to do is know how to set a dial."

"Mmm-mh mm-mmh mm-mm," Ting Fu said.

Peter rushed on with his merciless exposition of his own past obtuseness. "And yes, I'm a sucker and a chump and I let five thousand dollars fog my wits. I've been as dumb as the cops who never fell over his rat's nest in all these years he's been planted here as a top-flight spy. And he's as clever as a devil, like all of you. Even if I'd get cold feet and squeal, would I get anywhere? Like hell! He's stacked every crooked card against me. He's a rich and influential British subject and nobody must start a fuss with him. And all the evidence is *here;* not in any of his shops. But he had to talk at last. Fi' thousan' dorrar! Cash on derivery! So he quick ordered two of his gorillas to come and get me before *I* could talk. But I've got time. By hell, yes. I've got time!"

Very grimly, methodically, Peter made to step down into the water alongside of his deadly laden machine. "And I'll let you watch, my smart little monkey. Yes, I'll let you see all of it." He hoisted Ting Fu out and propped him in the cockpit.

"Mmm hmm mm-mmh mh-mmm," Ting Fu's mumblings were an agony.

"What am I going to do? Is that it? Ha!" Peter's voice was rasping iron. "He wants a torpedo, does he? So I'm going to make delivery, by God! Right now! And if a teakwood boxful of cash gets hurt in the scramble—well, there's some things that fi' thousan' dorrar don't buy."

Waist deep in the scum, Peter maneuvered the deadly thing that he had made. He stooped low to get his bearing under the boathouse wall at Wang Ch'in Wu's splendid shedful of treachery.

"All I got to do is set the depth dial. Three feet, I'll call it." The rope of Peter's ingenious contrivance for sinking the evidence was still fast to the struts of the little propellers. He slashed it short and took a good hold around his wrist. With his hand he slapped back the lever that is tripped by a torpedo's firing tube!

With a little squeak the compressed air rushed to perform all of its multifarious functions. The iron fish came to life. The dual propellers began to whirl. The thing strained against Peter's rope!

"Just get it started right." Peter bent to squint out at his aim. He could hold it no longer. He let go!

Low as he was to the surface, he couldn't see anything of a track that it might leave in the water. For a moment—for an age—his heart clogged his mouth. He watched the scummy surface for a sign. There was none. The devilish machinery ran true.

And then came the terrific WHOOM of the explosion.

The sound wave hit Peter's own shed and the racket of rickety boards drowned out everything else. Peter crouched to peer. All he could see was a great boil of muddy water and a rain of falling timber. Then the wave came surging in and slapped him floundering. He came up gagging. He spat mud and a small crustacean from his mouth, hoisted himself into his boat. He could hear the rising clamor of yells and gongs, the sheer uproar with which an Oriental crowd responds to any event, from accident to air raid to marriage and birth.

Peter's eyes stared into emptiness, as though overawed by what he had done. Unthinking, he untied Ting Fu, held him irresolute. Till a fleeting memory came. "So that's why you were so damned proud about being man-handled. And you're going to kill me? So here's goodbye." He hefted Ting Fu like a drop kicker does a football, dropped him and booted him well and clear into the water. Then he went out and sat down in his shop to wait. To hide, he knew, would be even more stupid than his accusation of himself.

WITHIN the fifteen minutes they were there. The Police. They said, "We don't know whether this was an accident or whether you jolly well had something to do with it. We don't know whether your quarrel with Wang Ch'in Wu was deadly enough to run to wholesale slaughter; or if it was, how you did it. Or if it wasn't, what the deuce was Wang doing with so much explosive hidden in his shed? We know nothing. But we're dashed well going to lock you up until we can find some witnesses and investigate the matter."

"I'll make a bet," said Peter, "you'll never round up nary a witness against me out of all of Wang's outfit. My guess is all his gang were with him—except one. He was here a little while ago and he could tell you everything about me."

"He could? Well, why didn't 'e wait? What's bloomin' well become of the blighter?"

"His name," said Peter, "is Ting Fu—so he said. And if you've got a clever little red tag against him in your file like you got for me, he's for you to scurry out and round up. Me, I roll my own. It don't hardly pay sometimes. But—it's a satisfaction worth *lots* of dollars."

New ENLARGEMENT
Just to get acquainted, we will beautifully enlarge your favorite snapshot, photo, Kodak picture, print or negative to 5x7 inches, if you enclose this ad with a 3c stamp for return mailing. Please include color of hair and eyes and get our new Bargain Offer giving you your choice of handsome frames with a second enlargement beautifully hand tinted in natural lifelike colors and sent on approval. Your original returned with your enlargement. Send today.
DEAN STUDIOS, Dept. 864, 211 W. 7th St., Des Moines, Iowa
3¢
STAMP

They Were All Actors, Members of a Summer Stock Company. Even the Deputy Sheriff Used to Be in Vaudeville

DEATH IN STOCK

By WILLIAM G. BOGART

Author of "Dr. Strange's Job," etc.

SHE was a tall, slender girl, and about her there was a quiet and reserved manner. She moved with a graceful stride past the small, quaint inn that bordered a high bluff overhanging the Cape. From an open window of a room behind her came the incessant chatter, the good-natured bickering of those other members of the small cast of the Wayside Players. But she felt that she'd had about all she could stand of it for the time being: the rehearsals, the set-backs, the frantic hope that perhaps Morris Moore would consider the play for one of his Broadway productions this fall. She simply *had* to be alone for a little while, in order to think, to think about—Ralph. Why he'd had to turn up here now, when there was trouble trying to keep the summer stock theater going, meeting bills, paying for meals and board here at the inn.

Atop the bluff she paused, wearily pushing her slim hands up across her face. She rumpled her soft dark hair, feeling the wet coolness of the fog against her brow. She looked down the steep path that lay ahead, eyes trying to pierce the swirling mists that rolled up from the sea. There was no view

of the water down below; in fact, she could hardly see a dozen feet ahead.

It was the third day now that the fog had spread over the inlet, damp and gray and thick. And yet, in a way, she liked it. She liked to hear the mournful, far-off sound of the deep-throated foghorn, out on the Point. It came at exact sixty-second intervals, and trembled through the air.

There was something thrilling and mysterious about the fog, and the ocean that you could not see, but which you could *feel* so close by. She moved slowly down the rocky path, aware of its every turn, because she had followed it so many times during the summer.

Down, down, the path wound, until she came to the hilly sand dunes that bordered the shore. Tall sea grass brushed at her skirt, and sand fell into her low-heeled shoes. She liked the feel of the sand and the salty wetness that was blown against her hot cheeks.

If only she could not think of Ralph. Why had he come back to torment her? He was probably back there in the living room now, boasting of the shows in which he'd been a star, perhaps even telling them things about *her!* He had promised—

One of her shoes had pulled loose. She bent down, shook out the sand, started to slip the shoe over her foot again.

And her wide-eyed gaze froze on something directly ahead.

At first, she had thought it was a coat or a blanket left on the beach. The dark blotch, vague in the thick mist, had merely startled her for a moment.

And then she knew that it was no coat or blanket. It was a human figure, sprawled at a grotesque angle—and so very, very *still!*

Trembling, her hands clenched at her sides, Myra forced herself to move forward toward the motionless figure. She saw that it was a man, and apparently he had been wearing a loose slicker against the penetrating dampness of the fog. The garment was flung about him now, over his face, so that she could not see the features.

She drew up, staring in rigid fascination at the still figure. Perhaps he was just asleep. Perhaps—

The thing was, she had to be sure.

Myra stooped down and pulled aside that part of the coat which had blown across the man's face. And she recoiled in horror.

The man was dead. Crimson smeared his heavy features. It had dribbled down the front of his open sports shirt and stained the fabric. The ugly knife wound in the man's throat was—ghastly.

He was, she knew immediately, quite dead.

But it was not this alone that brought a rasping cry from her throat.

The man was—Ralph!

Somehow, Myra Fay found her way back to the steep path that led upward to the bluff. The rocks tore at her light shoes. Once, she fell, and in order to keep from pitching head-first down the embankment beside the path, she flung out slim hands.

She landed on hands and knees, a rocky piece of stone slashing into her tender palms. The rough stone drew blood, and as she swayed to her feet again she stared at her crimson-stained hands in revulsion. They reminded her so much of that—gruesome sight back—there!

Excited, Myra wiped her palms down across the light jacket that she was wearing. She hurried on, up the steep incline, the breath coming from her lungs in little explosive gasps. Through the descending dusk came the distant, throbbing moan of the foghorn out on the Point. It was no longer a fascinating sound.

It reminded her of the banshee wail of death!

She finally gained the top of the bluff and ran along the path that led to the small inn. She cried out for help, and it seemed to her that her frantic words were gobbled up by the heavy fog.

At last the outlines of the house came into view and she knew some measure of relief. Lights showed in the windows.

Tall Ben Mosier appeared around the corner of the building. She almost collapsed in his arms.

BEN MOSIER—deputy sheriff of the little community there at Sea Point—was not used to having pretty dark-haired girls rush into his arms. Ben was over forty, and hardly one to attract the feminine sex. In fact, he looked more like a gangling, weather-beaten Cape Cod fisherman than a law officer who had hopes of some day being one of the Wayside Players.

He stammered, still clutching the girl, "Well, I say—*my gracious!*"

Then he realized that the girl was sobbing, and that there was terror deep in her dark eyes. He gripped her slim arms firmly and held her away from him. He liked Myra Fay; throughout the summer while the small stock company had been located here at the Point, he had got to know this crowd of youngsters pretty well.

He asked quietly, "I say, child—what's wrong?"

The girl managed to get some control of herself. She flung up an arm and pointed vaguely in the direction of the beach. "Down—there!" she gasped. "Lying in the sand—"

Tall Ben Mosier frowned. "Wait'll you get your breath," he said.

But she continued: "He's dead, stabbed! He's been *murdered.*"

Ben stared at the girl. He had seen these youngsters act some pretty good roles this summer; he knew that Myra, here, was one of the best of the bunch. But this was no part the girl was acting now. She was trembling, terror-stricken.

He prodded. "Dead? Who?"

"Ralph!" the girl sobbed. "Ralph Hanley!" She pointed again. "Down the path—the beach."

Darkness was fast settling down. If he was going to investigate the girl's claim, Ben thought, he'd better hurry.

He nodded toward the inn, suggested, "You'd better stay here. You—you're upset, girl." He squinted at her in the gathering gloom. "You said—stabbed?"

She jerked her head, a trembling hand jammed against her teeth. "Somebody," Myra choked out, "stabbed him with a—knife."

Urging the girl toward the house, Ben swung and cut toward the path down the bluff. Gone was his easy manner, the good-natured curve of his mouth. His mouth set grimly. The girl was telling the truth; he had seen this only too well. She was terrified.

He reached the steep downgrade, slowed a little because of the darkness and the fog. He knew every foot of territory around here, yet, at night, anyone could miss a step and take a nasty spill.

He was just reaching for his flashlight, in the side pocket of his loose jacket, when he heard someone hurrying up the path from the beach. He started to call out, "Who's that?" and then checked himself. Best to find out, first, who was prowling around down here.

But, he realized too late, the other person had caught his half-startled exclamation. A figure slammed into him in the darkness. Ben Mosier was thrown off balance, sideways, and his long arms flailed wildly. Fingers raked a short leather coat, slid off—and he pitched to his hands and knees.

Whoever had been coming up the path in the darkness whirled back and tried for an escape.

But, in falling, the lawman's hands flung out and caught hold of the other man's legs. There was a surprised grunt, a heavy thud as the marauder hit the ground.

Both men came to their feet together. Ben's strong hands seized at his quarry again. But his assailant was agile, quick. He dived past the tall deputy and struck out down the rocky path.

Ben leaped after him, throwing caution to the wind, not even taking time to dig the flashlight from his jacket pocket. He wanted to have both hands free—just in case.

Small stones rattled down the incline, loosened by pounding feet. It struck Ben Mosier that the prowler must be someone as well acquainted with this vicinity as himself.

The other man reached the foot of the incline several feet ahead of the deputy sheriff. He slid in the sand, caught his balance, cut left toward the hard-packed part of the beach.

Ben Mosier was right on the man's heels. He could dimly make out the vague, shadowy form just ahead of him.

THEN, perhaps remembering that the moist, hard-packed sand would hold imprints of a shoe, the man cut back again toward the dunes that bordered the shore. He momentarily disappeared beyond a rising sand dune.

Ben raced over the hummock ahead—and stared. His quarry had disappeared.

Or was it the darkness, the blowing puffs of heavy mist that had fooled him? He paused a moment, getting his bearings. There was a whispering *shush* of sound close by.

He spun, saw the ruse his quarry had tried. The man had flung himself flat, was now rising up again and heading back!

Ben Mosier, with a mutter of rage, followed. There was no doubt now in his mind

that the prowler was someone connected with this—this murder the girl had described. Otherwise, why the frantic desire to escape? If he could catch the man—

The chase continued down the beach, through soft, loose sand that shifted at each footfall. But Ben felt that he was gaining on his quarry—when he heard excited voices just off to his right. He recognized Myra's voice, and others. They were coming down from the inn.

The group of people reached the beach just as Ben Mosier gained the path. He had to jerk to a quick halt lest he slam into one of them.

He yelled a warning. "Look out! There's a man just beyond you!"

With gasps of dismay they spread out, staring first at Ben Mosier, whom they all knew, and then into the misty darkness of the fog-shrouded beach.

Ben warned them back, yanked the flashlight from his pocket and moved quickly ahead. He sent the powerful beam into the night. He saw nothing.

He ran a little farther, paused, listened. All that reached his ears was the intermittent, weird sound of the powerful foghorn out on the Point.

His quarry had escaped.

HE TURNED back, joined the group of people who had come down the path. There were four of the Wayside Players, including tall, slender Myra Fay. Two others came running up even as Ben reached the group. All were panting with excitement after the wild race down the steep incline.

Someone gasped, "Myra—told us—Ralph stabbed—"

Ben turned and looked at Myra Fay. "Where—" he started.

She pointed beyond him. "Right over there—" And then her words trailed off. She swayed, her eyes horror-filled.

"The body," the girl stammered, "it's gone!"

Later, Ben Mosier was convinced that Myra Fay had been telling the truth. If for only one good reason. From the inn, he had got in contact with the few stores and bars and shops around the Point where a person could possibly go. He had assigned men to comb the small community. And at ten that night everyone had the same thing to report.

Ralph Hanley had not been seen.

Naturally he had inspected the area on the beach that Myra had pointed out as the murder scene. But there had been too much trampling of feet by that time to tell much of anything. In the loose sand it was impossible to tell, now, exactly what had happened.

He thought of the unseen man who had escaped under cover of the fog. Surely, that incident alone lent verification to the girl's story of murder.

But as Ben made his way back to the small inn, he shook his head grimly. He had been informed that a State police officer was already on his way here. What would the man think when Ben told him there had been a murder—*a murder without any corpse.*

The half-dozen members of the Wayside Players were still gathered in the comfortable living room of the inn which had been their summer home.

Two of those beside Myra Fay, Ben passed up. They were the Allison sisters, young, pretty, blond. They hardly looked capable of committing—murder.

Besides, there was the person who had escaped Ben Mosier down on the beach. A man. And obviously the murderer.

And so his attention swung to the three remaining members of the small but talented stock company.

Johnny Dixon was talking to Myra, holding her hands solicitously as he said something in a low voice. Ben could not catch the young actor's words. Dixon turned at the deputy's approach.

He was a tall blond young man with smooth, nice features. He looked sharply at Ben Mosier and said, "Do you *have* to submit her to this? Can't she go to her room?" He indicated Myra. "After all, the shock she's been through—"

Ben sighed and shook his head slowly. "Sorry," he said. "But that trooper fellow is on his way down here now. He'll want to talk to you folks."

There was a grunt of disapproval from a short, trim-looking man across the room. His name was Harry Boone.

"For heaven's sake," Harry Boone cut in sharply, "let's cut out the dramatics! If you ask me, I think both Mosier *and* Myra have had a pipe dream." He looked at the tall, gangling deputy sheriff. "We all know that Ben Mosier has been trying all summer to get a job with us. Now he's putting on this

would-be murder skit in order to make a final impression!"

Ben Mosier stepped across the room, pulled the short, neatly dressed man right out of his chair. "Get this straight, Boone," he growled, "Myra saw Ralph Hanley down there on the beach, and he was dead." His steely gray eyes swung around the tense group of people. "Each one of you hated Ralph Hanley. The man was a leech, shiftless—a drunk. None of you wanted him in the cast. But he hung around, annoying everybody, putting a jinx on this company. And so—somebody here decided to eliminate him!"

Ben was trembling a little when he finished with the outburst. That remark of Boone's had stung him deeply. Everyone here knew that Ben Mosier had once been a small-time trouper in vaudeville. Show business had ever since been in his blood, and this summer, making the acquaintance of the Wayside Players, he had thought—he had *hoped* a little that he might get a small bit part with them. And now——

The third man of the group looked at tall Ben Mosier and said, "I think Myra's telling the truth. I think there was murder."

There was something about heavy-set, jovial Kirk McCabe's tone that caught Ben's attention. He looked at the big blond man, then caught the significant glance that McCabe shot in the direction of Myra.

Ben Mosier was the only person in the room who caught that glance, and he stiffened. He saw the trace of a crimson-red smear on Myra's light jacket! A smear that could have been—blood.

Ben could understand how a smear like that could get there. A person, wiping his hands hurriedly. . . .

He tried to tell himself that the girl, Myra, could not have done it. And yet there was something he knew about her that would give her motive for murder. It was only two days ago that, unobserved, he had come upon Myra and Ralph Hanley talking there down the road.

Hating himself for this thing he must now do, he said to the girl, "Myra?"

She looked up, turning slightly away from good-looking Johnny Dixon. "Yes, Ben?"

"Ralph Hanley was your husband, wasn't he?"

The tall girl's face went pale. She was visibly upset. Then she slowly got hold of herself, raised her chin proudly and said, "Yes, he was." Her dark eyes flashed around the group of people, all of whom were now staring at her.

"Ralph and I were separated two years ago," she went on. "It was supposed to be final, complete. I got tired of supporting him. I've been trying to get a divorce. And now, this summer, he came here, made me help to get him in the company."

Big Kirk McCabe said, "And he stunk! No one wanted him in the cast. But you couldn't even *insult* that guy!"

Myra's eyes fell. She finished quietly, "Ralph drank too much. He always wanted money. I—I no longer loved him, but——" She looked up. Her eyes flashed. "But I didn't *kill* him!"

From the doorway of the room the man in the trim uniform of the State police said sharply, "Then who *did?*"

THE man from the State police was tough. He was relentless.

The questioning went on throughout the night, and once he even herded everyone down to the beach and questioned them there. The beach was searched again. But no body, no dead man was found.

At eight that next morning, the trooper—he was a short, stocky man named Peter Kane—drew Ben Mosier aside and said significantly, "Mosier, it's screwy as hell. All we have is this girl's word that *anyone* was murdered. But you can't have an inquest without a corpse. We haven't even got a case. If you should ask me, I say she was just seeing things!"

Ben said, "I still believe her."

Kane smiled. "Well, it's your case. Find the corpse. I can't hold these people. They're planning on returning to New York tomorrow, and I'll have to let them go."

"Tomorrow?" Ben frowned. If he didn't produce a corpse and catch a murderer within the next twenty-four hours, he could imagine what was going to happen. He'd be the laughing stock of the Point. He'd be kidded right out of a job.

His jaw set grimly, and he said, "I've got an idea. Maybe I'll find you that corpse."

The remainder of that day no one saw Ben Mosier at all.

Night had settled down. With it, there was again the heavy fog that rolled in from the ocean. And again, since dusk, the mourn-

ful blast of the foghorn out on the Point.

Ben Mosier led the small group of people down the rocky path toward the shore. There was the girl, Myra, and the three men.

Jovial Kirk McCabe, leading the way with Ben, said, "This is getting to be silly. Looking for a corpse!"

Short, alert-looking Harry Boone seemed frightened. "It's—it's nonsense!" he exclaimed, and he didn't sound convincing.

It was blond, good-looking Johnny Dixon who accompanied the girl. He grinned and said, "You're not afraid of spooks, are you, Boone?"

Little Harry Boone said nothing.

At the beach, Ben drew up and said, "You've all got flashlights. We'll spread out and make a search. If anyone of you finds anything, call the others."

"What do you expect to find?" demanded Johnny Dixon. He was still grinning as he flashed Myra a warm smile.

"We'll see—" Ben Mosier started, then he stared tensely into the surrounding gloom.

"What's the matter?" someone prodded.

"Listen!" cautioned Ben.

Then everyone heard it. They, too, stared into the darkness and the heavy fog.

It was a man's voice, heavy, deep—talking.

Myra gave a throaty cry and clutched the gangling lawman's arm. "It—it—" She couldn't speak. Her face was white with horror.

It was small little Harry Boone who cried, "Ralph Hanley! It was—*his voice!*"

Ben swung into action. "He's here some place! Try to find him!"

But the girl, Myra, was frozen. "He—he can't be!" she choked out. "Ralph's dead. I *saw* him, I told you."

Again came the voice out of the mist. It called out, "I say—where are you all?"

The girl clung to Ben's arm. She was trembling with fright. It was good natured Kirk McCabe who laughed and said, "Hell! I knew the guy was all right. Probably been on a drunk. Come on!" He seized small Harry Boone's arm and started down the beach in the direction of the voice in the darkness.

Johnny Dixon looked at Ben Mosier and said, "I'll go this way. I think the voice came from down here. This fog is deceiving."

The girl started to trail the first two men. Ben seized her arm, said, "Wait a minute."

She paused, looking at him questioningly. In a moment they were standing there alone, as the others moved off. "What—" she started.

Fright made her voice a husky rasp.

Ben nodded in the direction that blond-haired Johnny Dixon had taken. "Quiet, now," he warned, and he took the girl's arm.

She asked tensely, "Ben, what is it?"

"We'll see," was all he said. Then he motioned her to silence.

Ahead, both could hear the footsteps scuffing through the loose, deep sand. After awhile those footsteps paused.

Ben drew up sharply, held the girl's arm hard. "Quiet!" he whispered.

They waited, in darkness, the fog wet and thick all around them.

Then both of them heard the digging sounds. It was like something scraping at the sand somewhere near them. Quick sounds, they were, and steady.

The girl's slim fingers dug into the deputy sheriff's arm. "Ben," she whispered, *"what is it?"*

He waited a moment longer, then took a few cautious steps forward. Suddenly the deep voice came again. A voice that said from out of the mist, "Were you looking for something, Johnny Dixon?"

Except for the quick movement of Ben's hand, the girl would have cried out in horror. His fingers covered her lips. She stood stock-still.

The digging sounds had abruptly stopped. There was taut silence, and through that silence both heard a man's labored, quick breathing.

Ben whispered, "Careful," and shot on the flashlight beam.

The white cone of the beam caught blond-haired Johnny Dixon bent down on the ground. In front of the young man gaped a long, deep trench in the loose sand.

As the sharp flashlight glare caught him in its glow, his head jerked around. His eyes stared wildly, horror-filled. At that instant the voice came out of the fog again.

"I fooled you, didn't I?" said the voice. "You didn't think I could come back to haunt you, did you, Johnny Dixon? Just because you killed me, you thought——"

A scream rose in Johnny Dixon's throat. It choked off as the blond young man swayed

to his feet and stared into the white cone of light. He batted at the light with his hands, and cried at the same time, "No! No! *Get away* from me."

HIS bleared, wild-eyed gaze went from the hole he had dug in the loose sand to the sound of the voice, which seemed to be in the direction of the light.

"You *did* kill me, didn't you, Johnny?" the strange voice went on relentlessly.

"Yes!" cried Johnny Dixon. "I killed you! You—you're *dead!* You can't hurt me now."

Ben Mosier shoved the flashlight into the girl's hand and leaped forward. Ben was revealed in the beam of light, and instantly Johnny Dixon's manner changed. The look of fright swept from his face, was replaced by a quick, intense expression of fury. As though he suspected some kind of trick, he leaped at the tall deputy sheriff.

The blond young man was wiry and strong-built. Ben knocked down a pair of powerful hands that clutched for his throat. He smashed a fist into his opponent's jaw.

Johnny Dixon cursed. He tripped the lawman, landed atop him in the sand. There was abruptly a knife in the young actor's hand. The girl, Myra, screamed.

Behind her, the two other men—Little Harry Boone and Kirk McCabe—came running up.

Ben twisted. His foot came up, slammed out. The knife went flying through the air. Breath exploded from the blond man's lungs and he flopped over—right into the trench-like hole he had dug in the sand.

Breathing hard, Ben Mosier bent down, grabbed Johnny Dixon by the coat collar, drabbed him clear of the loose sand.

He said to those behind him, "Watch this guy!"

Then he bent down, finished what Johnny Dixon had been doing when trapped. He finished scooping the sand off the thing that was buried there in the beach.

The body of a dead man.

Later, Ben said grimly, "I suspected Johnny Dixon when I snooped around and found that he had been trying to make love to Myra, here."

He patted the girl's cold hand. They were gathered in the living room of the inn now. The trooper, Kane, had been called. Johnny Dixon had already been taken away, after fully confessing to the murder.

Ben looked at the girl, some of the grimness dropping from his face. "Johnny was pestering Myra to marry him. Then Ralph Hanley, who was her husband, had to return. He wouldn't let Myra get a divorce. He was still getting money from her, trying to live off her. Johnny found out, and figured with Ralph Hanley out of the way he would have a clear field."

Ben's arm rested gently on the girl's shoulder. "I don't think you loved Johnny, did you? I mean, I felt like a heel—"

Myra raised misted eyes to the easy-mannered lawman's. She said quietly, "It's all right, Ben. You had to find the—murderer." She shook her head. "I didn't love Johnny."

It was big Kirk McCabe who asked, "But that voice—Ralph Hanley's voice—down there on the beach! I don't understand—"

Ben said, "I had to find the body, naturally." He smiled. "I guess everybody would have thought me pretty much of a chump if I didn't. And the only way I could find that body was to make the actual murderer reveal it for me. I had to scare him into it, so that he would return to see that the body was still there. You see, after Myra first saw it, it disappeared. Johnny must have spotted her on the beach, waited until she came up here to give warning, then quickly buried the corpse down the beach."

Little Harry Boone said, "That's right. Johnny was the last one to join us when we all ran down there. He must have circled around, caught up with us."

Ben nodded, "I figured something like that. But you were all breathing hard from running, and so I couldn't tell who it was I chased on the beach—"

"Yes," big McCabe agreed. "But there's still that *voice* of the dead man—"

Ben looked suddenly self-conscious. He said quietly, "Guess you folks didn't believe me when I said I used to be in vaudeville. I did a little skit where I impersonated people—"

"You mean—"

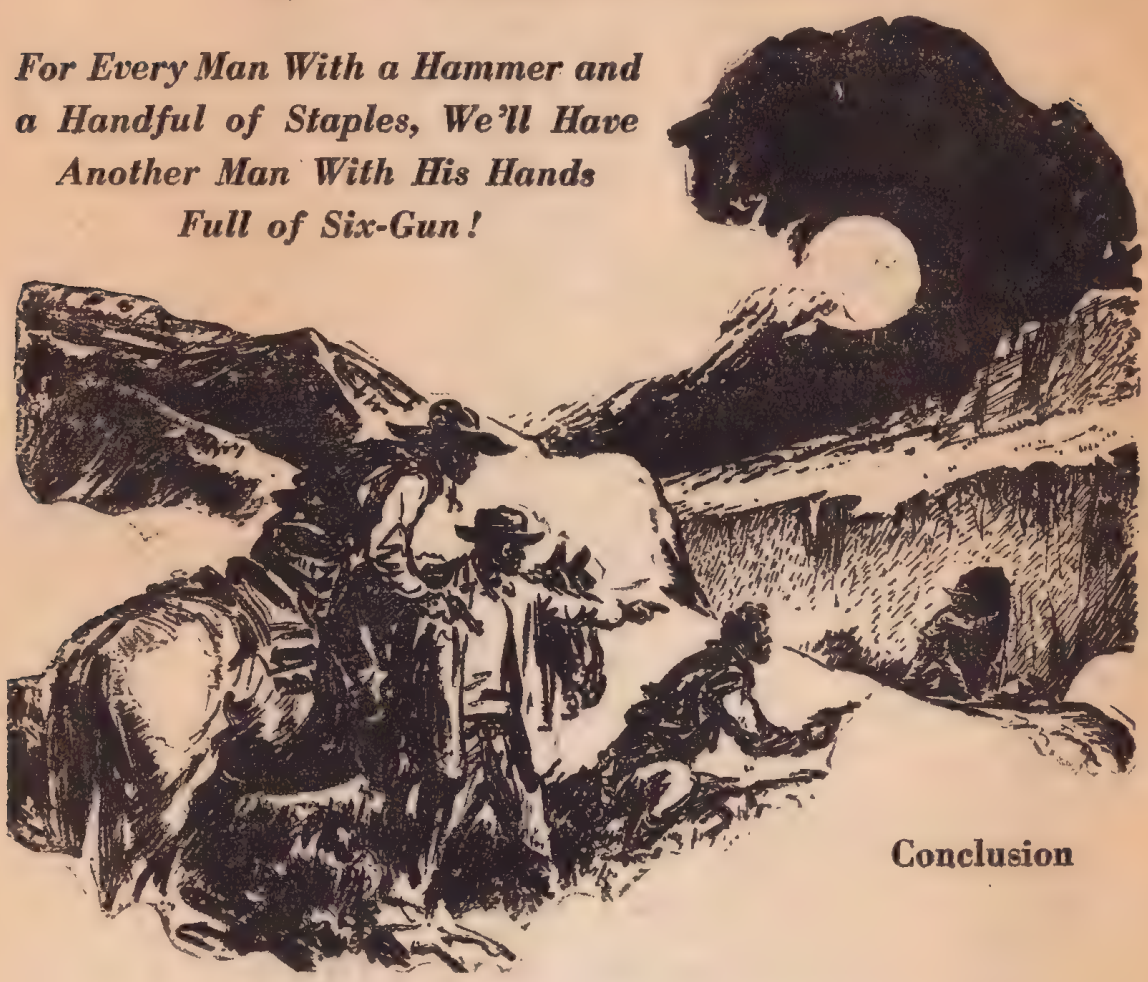
"I was a ventriloquist," Ben said sheepishly.

The girl, Myra, looked up at lanky Ben Mosier warmly. She touched his arm. "And," she added, "not a bad actor!"

BARB WIRE

By W. RYERSON JOHNSON

For Every Man With a Hammer and a Handful of Staples, We'll Have Another Man With His Hands Full of Six-Gun!



Conclusion

CHAPTER XVI

BLOOD ON THE WIRE

"TAKE it easy, Eddy," Lige Carson soothed. "I got men posted. Deuce and his gunners can't get anywhere near that sidetrack."

"It's not the sidetrack where they're headin'—it's here! They'll blast you out . . . like they did me. They caught me listenin'. But I got away. I got here in time, Indigo. You can save the fence, can't you . . . and everything we been fightin' for? . . ."

The youngster's voice was weakening fast. The doctor had an arm around him now, easing him to the ground. "Save your strength, lad. Don't talk any more."

"I won't, Doc—not much more." He made a wild, pathetic attempt to grin. "Save your strength too, Doc. Don't waste it on me. I—I'm shot to pieces, Doc. I'm already dead and I don't know it. I don't even feel anything any more." He coughed, shuddered, and kept gritting out the words. "I don't hold any grudge against you, Doc, for knifin' me that time. I was askin' for it, Indigo says. And I caught your play in the saloon tonight, Doc. You were—some wonderful. You're one of us, ain't you, Doc? I think we got 'em licked all right. I reckon life'll be right good livin' in Sweetgrass Valley from now on. I—I wisht I could stay and live it too. Tell—tell Carolina I got here in time. . . ."

He died there in the doctor's hands.

And Dr. Clyde Arington, who had seen

all manner of men die, found his throat in so tight a knot that the only way he could loosen it was by weeping frank unashamed tears. He wasn't alone in that. Lige and Jim Juniper were wet-eyed too. Even Charlie the Ute was looking sternly away in the other direction.

They carried Eddy Gilpin's body into the house. Carolina took the blow as the doctor had known she would take it, with pioneer courage. This was the second brother she had lost in the fight for freedom in Sweetgrass Basin.

"He was so young," she sobbed. "So young!"

She went away and cried for a while by herself in another room. But not for long. She came back again to carry on the fight. White-faced, holding her trembling lips between her teeth, she moved with swift resolution, breaking out cartridges, inspecting the guns, doing whatever needed to be done to prepare for the coming attack.

Outside, the men worked desperately. There were only the six of them: Lige Carson, Jim Juniper, Charlie the Ute, the doctor, Barb-wire Barney, and Frijole—one hard-bitten rancher, one old-time outlaw, one renegade Indian, one eccentric eastern doctor, one bullet-incapacitated fat man, and one orphan boy, to stand off all the gunners that Deuce Le Deux and Chilcott could corral that night and send against them.

But the fat man had an idea, and they all had cool courage.

The fat man's idea concerned the carload of barbed wire that had been stored for three years in a shed.

"Where can we expect the attack?" Barb-wire Barney, talking around his stogy in his deep burry voice that was always such a surprise, inquired of Lige Carson.

"I'd say from the open side," Lige told him. "They'll figure that Eddy Gilpin got through to warn us. Reasonin' from that, they'll expect us to put up our defense from cover of the salt-cedar grove. So I figure they'll try to come at us from behind. The way the ground lays in that direction they'll have cover till they get close in. They'll come hellin' in on horseback, figurin' to catch us by surprise, and capture the house before we can get back from the grove to defend it."

"We'll lay our plans accordin'," Barb-wire Barney said.

They lifted Barney in his leather-bottomed chair and carried him out into the ranchyard. With a long rifle across his knees, and a six-gun belted to his fat middle, he sat there like an Oriental potentate, puffing smoke and directing defense preparations.

Stretching away from the ranchhouse was a relatively level expanse, a grassy plain broken only by a few rocky outcrops, over which any attack from this direction was bound to develop. Under Barney's directions, the men rolled spools of barbed wire from the shed. Working with frenzied haste, they strung it in parallel lines no higher from the ground than the tops of the grass, sinking low posts, mere stubs of wood, where they had to, and utilizing the rocky outcrops for wire fasteners wherever they could.

Frijole was jumping up and down. "What can I do? What can I do?"

Barb-wire Barney sent him to the top of the windmill to act as lookout, a job he accepted with a gurgle of excited pleasure.

The doctor found time to exchange a few tense words of greeting with Barney. While he chopped fence pegs and pointed them with the ax, the doctor said, "I've got a letter to show you, Barney, that will explain why we were all so worried about you."

"I was there when the letter was written," Barney said fiercely. "Deuce Le Deux wrote it and signed it, the Blue Blazers. To spot the blame even more to the Indigo Kid, he stuck that barb wire tag to my business card. The tag, as you've guessed by now, or maybe been told, is the Indigo Kid's own sign. More about that later, but for now it's enough to say that Deuce had every intention of treating me like he said in the note. But before he could wrap me in barb wire and roll me down that long hill, the Indigo Kid —that's Lige Carson, as you know—come gunnin' down on him. The Kid blasted me out from under Deuce's tender care. But I already had a bullet through my back. I was in bad shape. The Kid managed to spirit me out of the basin to where I could get medical attention. I was more dead than alive for a long while. But I'm tough as the barb wire I sell. I pulled through, and the Indigo Kid brought me back to the basin to check on you." Barney paused, puffing furiously on the stogy.

"The rest you know," he resumed. "We had a brush with some of Ed Chilcott's gunhands and I collected another bullet—which

you took out for me that night at the Patch, and which I'm still convalescing from."

"We'll have some prime stories to swap when this is over," the doctor said grimly.

"More wire pegs," Lige shouted at the doctor.

The doctor took them forward on the run.

IT WASN'T long after that until Frijole came scrambling down from the windmill tower. "They're comin'," he yelled to Barb-wire Barney. "I could see 'em plain in the moonlight from on top. They're comin' like an army, ridin' fast."

Barney in his burry roar, relayed the message to the men working with the wire. He even dignified the occasion by removing the stogy from his mouth.

The defenders dropped their work on the meadow and converged on the ranchhouse. They took up battle positions. Barb-wire Barney, Carolina Gilpin, and Frijole prepared to fight a covering action with rifles from the windows of the ranchhouse. Lige Carson, Jim Juniper, Charlie the Ute, and the doctor, climbed in saddle and held their broncs waiting in the shadows of the outer ranch buildings. Each man wore two holstered six-guns. Twelve bullets per man —forty-eight shots without reloading.

They heard the ground-tremoring thud of the riders . . . then the Deuce-Chilcott extermination crew topped the rise and burst into view, bearing down on the ranchhouse in full gallop. One of the gunmen jumped trigger, started firing. That set the rest of them off. Bullets from twenty-odd guns made deadly patter against the ranchhouse.

"Hold your fire!" Lige cautioned his men.

They followed orders. Four mounted men, backed up by an injured fat man, a girl, and a child—they waited tensely in the shadows while the raiders gunned forward. Closer and closer they came, until above the hoofed thunder, their hoarse voices could be heard. Closer and closer. It looked as though nothing on earth could save the defenders from the blood-lust of this pack determined to avenge the burning of the Crystal Palace, and the snatching away of their hanging victim.

And if this little group went down, then nothing could save the basin from the stark gun-rule of Deuce Le Deux and Ed Chilcott. Here at the ranchhouse were the brains and the soul of the fight for freedom. From the farthest corners of the basin men were even now converging on the railroad sidetrack in response to the word passed around by the Indigo Kid and his Blue Blazers. They had been promised that they would see something in the nature of a miracle. But if no miracle were forthcoming, there would be nothing for them but to drag home again—to slavery.

So they waited, that little group of defenders at the ranchhouse, aware that more than their own future depended upon the outcome of the next few minutes. Then it happened—that thing for which they waited. One of the gun-raiders, spurring a little ahead of the others to be first on the kill, suddenly went head over heels off his horse.

His horse headed over too. Coming fast behind him, three more horses went up in the air, to fall in wide-legged sprawls, pitching their riders. Some of the horses coming from behind couldn't be pulled up in time. They rammed into the horses struggling up from their fall.

To the melee of curses and gunfire was added the scream of the frightened horses —a rare and nerve-shuddering sound.

"Now's the time, boys!" Lige's order cracked.

The four of them spurred forward, low in saddle, their gun-muzzles blazing pale flame in the graying morning, their lead driving in with deadly effect to add to the frantic confusion of men and horses already death-scrambled over the plain. There weren't more than half of the Deuce-Chilcott combine who had been unhorsed, but the unnerving suddenness of it, the dust which had been kicked up and which obscured the count on the attackers from the ranchhouse, made the raiders react precisely as Barb-wire Barney had calculated.

With Lige and his men gunning in at this moment, the four of them sounded like forty. The three at the ranchhouse helped by sending rifle slugs whining over the heads of all in a relentless demoralizing stream.

"At 'em!" Ed Chilcott bawled, attempting to rally his men.

"At 'em!" Deuce Le Deux, from his position of relative safety somewhere in the back, seconded the command.

But neither order had any effect. Every man who could, had already swerved his bronc and was digging in steel to get away.

They weren't even taking time out to fire backwards as they rode. Fighting wages weren't enough to make them stand up to this kind of organized opposition. They preferred to run and come back again when the odds were better.

Three of the men who had been unhorsed, managed to catch mounts and ride away too. Four didn't get up at all. They never would get up. They were dead—victims of the Deuce-Chilcott drive for power in Sweetgrass Basin.

Three others, Lige and his men disarmed and captured. One of the three was Deuce's top gunner, Topaz Bane. The man's flat, straw-colored eyes blazed with cold malignance when he found out what had tripped his bronc. There was enough morning light now to see the barbed wire. Some of it still remained where it had been tautly strung in the grass. Some of it had been torn from place. It lay in the grass in snaky coils. Some of the wire was freshly red.

Barb-wire Barney insisted on being carried out to view the battlefield. He saw where the wire was red. He turned to Dr. Arington, who was somberly looking on.

"Three years ago, Doc, you predicted there'd be blood on the wire. And this is only a starter!" Barb-wire let the stogy sag in his mouth. "Progress never comes easy, looks like. People's selfish greed blinds 'em to the onrollin' tide, and progress comes violent. Every time. When they goin' to wake up and start pullin' together *before* trouble overwhelms 'em? Before, not after." He shook his head. "Anyhow, I'm glad no horses were killed."

LIGE strolled close. "Our day's work's just commenced," he said. "Our barb wire's due on the sidetrack right now. We've got to be gettin' out there. We'll all go. Carolina and Frijole too. It'll be safer there than here. We'll load your medical gear in the buckboard, Doc. Liable to need it before the day's over. And we'll take our three prisoners. They'll make a nice exhibition, don't you say, Barney?"

Long before they reached the railroad track, the doctor could see dust in the air. In every direction he looked—dust. Sometimes it was kicked up by horsemen. But more often it was wheeled into the air by lumbering freighters, buckboards, or an occasional ancient prairie schooner. The vehicles were all converging on the railroad sidetrack.

The doctor angled his horse close to Lige Carson's. "What is this anyway, Old Settler's Day on the range?"

"Old settlers and new settlers," Lige said soberly. "And to bring everything they've got on wheels, and to bring it empty because it's goin' back full."

"They're beaten," the doctor said. "They have been under the whip so long they've all got their tails between their legs. How you expect to buck them up is a mystery to me."

"I'll be makin' a speech. So will Barney. After that the only mystery around here will be the location of Devil's Pasture." He lifted his glance as he spoke, to the brooding Devil's Teeth Range in the near background. Tapering off from those jagged molars thrust to the sky, the rough country continued almost to the railroad sidetrack.

As they neared the railroad, the doctor saw that Lige was right about one thing at least—old settlers and new settlers, they were all here. The doctor recognized many of them. Their faces lighted up when they saw him. Most of them waved and called a friendly greeting.

They were gaunt, bent-shouldered men for the most part, looking years older than the doctor knew them to be. Men from the Patch, their insecurity in this world etched in lines of care and worry on their brown saddle-leather faces. Some of them had brought their women. Faded creatures, they seemed, for all their brown faces. Perhaps it was their shapeless calico dresses that gave them this appearance. But worry alone could have done it, worry and work, and no hope for anything, even life.

The doctor kept watching for someone whom he knew would not look faded, whose face wrinkles, if any, would be very unpermanent; someone whose worries had decidedly not sprung from having to "root hog or die."

He located her. Myrna Chilcott looked aloof even in the select little group with which she was identified here. But at least her poise was with her, which was more than could be said for the others. Hally Harper, who ran the Jackknife brand, and old Saltgrass Jimson, who had the Big A 2 horse ranch, looked definitely uneasy. Aside from Carson and Chilcott they were the only big

ranchers in the basin. It was the first time in their lives they had met with the little ranchers on a common basis. They felt out of place and they showed it.

The doctor turned to speak to Lige Carson, but Lige was gone. From the buckboard in which he had ridden with Carolina Gilpin and Frijole, Barb-wire Barney caught the doctor's eye. "Watch sharp," he warned, "for Lige's dramatic entrance. He'll be around back of a wagon somewhere swappin' horses."

Tied to a row of newly set posts, the horses with their wagons were strung out in a long line on one side of the track. The smell of crushed grass with the warmth of the sun in it arose in redolent waves from the ground as the people milled restlessly. At any other time the crushed-grass smell would have set the tempo for a good time, a gala celebration time. But it was something else that called the tune for this occasion. A low ridge ran to both sides of the plain where the crowd waited, and on both ridges a sinister sign was observable—sunflash on rifle barrels.

The crowd was aware that the covering rifles did not menace them. But the fact that it was considered necessary to have the meeting so well guarded, made everyone more nervous, more jumpy by the minute.

Just when the well-nigh fabulous man in the blue mask came among them, it was impossible to say. He didn't come galloping in a storm of hoof thunder and scudding gravel. He eased in. Nobody could say exactly from where. The impression that was created when the first man spotted him was that this masked figure on the big steel-blue roan had always been there, caring for them, even in a slightly mystical sense, shepherding them.

The word went around. Awareness of his presence seemed to strike them in a wave that swept to the farthest end of the crowd in an excited murmuring, then swept back again to wash out in dead silence as they regarded him, half in hope, but a little in dread because of the lies Deuce Le Deux had circulated about this phantom of the Devil's Pasture.

The Indigo Kid raised his hand. It wasn't an admonishing gesture. It had somehow the tone of a beneficent one. They moved silently closer.

"Friends," the Indigo Kid spoke, "each of you was invited here by someone you trust. Before this meeting is over I hope you'll trust me as well. Look around you. The men who invited you here, you'll see 'em now wearin' a piece of barb wire stuck in their shirt somewhere. Like this one I'm wearin'." He raised his fingers to touch the barb wire tag that was fastened to his lapel. "Deuce Le Deux," he continued, as apprehension mounted, "has spread the word around that the barb wire sign is a tag of death. It isn't—except for Deuce Le Deux and his like. For the rest of you, honest men who want only to live in peace with your neighbors, it's a sign of life. That's why I've called you together today to show you how you can fight for life—and win that fight! Under cover, I've been fighting for you. Now I'm coming out in the open."

He paused, gauging their indecision by their welter of confused and muttered protests. "You're all right Indigo Kid . . . but what about the big ranchers? They don't want us to live any more than Deuce Le Deux does. . . . We can't fight everybody. . . . "

The tenor of their protests concerned the big ranchers. As their muttering grew, the Jackknife and Big A 2 crowd drew closer together, nervously fingering six-guns.

CHAPTER XVII

HELL FREIGHT

THE Indigo Kid held up his hand for quiet again, and got it.

"It's my contention," he said, "that the welfare of both the big and little ranchers is best served by them stickin' together and makin' a common fight. I claim you'll both go up together, or you'll both go down. Deuce Le Deux and—" out of deference to Myrna, he didn't mention her father's name —"his supporters, are importin' gunmen by the dozens. I'm in a position to know. They've got a new string comin' in today. Maybe they're already quartered in Gunsight. But not at the Crystal Palace! You all know what we did to that last night."

He got a responsive roar from them on that. He continued:

"Suppose I show you just one of the so-called big ranchers of Sweetgrass Basin who's been with you from the first, who'll be with you to the finish. Would that encourage you?"

Their shouts let him know it would. But there was plenty of skepticism that he could produce this miracle.

"Watch close," he said, "while the professor changes an outlaw into a rancher." He pulled the blue handkerchief down from his face.

"Lige Carson!" the collective gasp went up. "The Indigo Kid . . . Lige Carson!" The names were mingled, repeated again and again in astonishment and disbelief.

The doctor was watching Myrna Chilcott's face. The surprise seemed to confuse her more than any of them. Her face whitened, her eyes widened. She forgot to maintain her poise.

Suddenly Salt-grass Jimson heeled his horse and pushed precipitantly out from that blue-ribbon crowd. He rode his horse over until it stood side by side with Lige Carson's steel-blue roan.

Salt-grass Jimson made a speech too. "I been slow gettin' my eyes open," he said. "I fought you all from the first. It's still, by God, my inclination to fight you. But it's my inclination to fight Deuce Le Deux more. Things I've seen happen in this basin, things Lige has just now showed us, has convinced me. If the fight's all right for Lige, it's all right for me."

Hally Harper rode his horse over too. "I stand with Salt-grass," was all he said.

They cheered long and loud. They particularly admired old Salt-grass Jimson for his outspoken honesty. He had been first on the land, and he didn't welcome newcomers crowding in. He didn't see eye to eye with them—not yet. But he saw the necessity of making a common struggle with them, and he didn't mush it when he put himself on record. They liked that about him.

Hally Harper's unflossed declaration was acceptable too. Their cheers quieted down and they looked at Myrna. Her cheeks were flushed. But she rode her horse over to stand by the others.

"I can't speak for my father," she said, "but I—I'm with you!"

They cheered her moderately. She looked, the doctor thought, like the loneliest girl in the world. For just an instant there, sentimentally, he was sorrier for her than for Carolina Gilpin who had already lost two brothers and a home in this fight.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Lige Carson boomed. "For the next few minutes I'm going to turn the meetin' over to a man you all know. He's goin' to show you exactly how we're goin' to beat the gun-rule in Sweetgrass Basin. Ladies and gentlemen, meet Barb-wire Barney."

From his seat nearby in the buckboard, Barb-wire Barney waved his blue and white checkered cap that the doctor had extracted from his duffle and presented to him before they left the ranchhouse.

"First off, folks," Barb-wire Barney told them, "I'm goin' to put on a show. Kindly will you one and all unhitch your horses from that line of posts. Contrary to appearances they weren't put there for hitchin' purposes. So kindly unhitch, please, and back your horses back a ways so they won't get scared at what happens."

With much excited speculation they did as he requested. Barney then waved his hand at a lone man in a wagon near the railroad track. The man pulled back a canvas tarp and revealed three spools of barbed wire mounted near the tailboard of the wagon.

"Watch close, everybody," Barb-wire Barney barked, "and see another modern miracle."

While they watched, the man jumped down from the wagon and stapled the ends of the wire to the nearest post. Then he drove his wagon along the line of posts, letting the barbed wire unroll. When he had paid off about a hundred yards from the spools mounted in the wagon, he stopped, jacked up a hind wagon-wheel, and fastened the loose end of the wire to the hub. He turned the wheel, winding the wire on the hub. He kept winding to take up the slack until the whole hundred-yard length of wire was taut against the fence posts. Then he took a bag of staples and a hammer and went down the line, fastening the wire to the posts.

"There's your modern miracle," Barb-wire Barney proclaimed. "A fence built in the twinklin' of an eye. A fence pig-tight, horse-high, and bull-strong. As you can see it takes up no more room than the edge of a shadow. It shades no grass, wears out no soil. The wind can't blow it down. And it's *cheap*. . . ." He held up his hand. "I know what you're mutterin' about. A bargain's not a bargain when a man's flat

broke. All right, listen. You're all goin' to get barbwire *free!* I've sold so much of it that just the barbs laid end to end would reach from here to Cheyenne and back sixteen and a half times. But now, actin' for Lige Carson—or the Indigo Kid, whichever name you know him best by—I'm givin' away a whole trainload free. Free for nothing, boys!"

Again he held up his hand to quiet their murmuring. "If it's free there must be a joker to it somewhere, you're sayin'. You're right. There's a joker. The joker's that Lige Carson wants to keep on livin' in Sweetgrass Basin too, and barb wire's the only thing that's goin' to make it possible. But not barb wire for him alone. It's no good if only one man fences. Then Deuce Le Deux and his pack simply guns him down and cuts the wire. But if you all drive away from here with wire—there's safety in numbers. Get it? If one or a dozen of you fences—no good. But if you all fence, then Deuce can't pick out the ringleaders. There won't be anywhere for him to start. We'll all work together, same as at round-up. We'll string one spread and move on to the next. And for every man with a hammer and handful of staples we'll have one man with his hands full of six-gun! How does it sound?"

THEIR unrestrained cheering let him know. They threw their sombreros in the air. They pulled up grass and threw it in the air. They jumped and whooped like children, these toil-worn men of Sweetgrass Basin. All but Hally Harper's and Saltgrass Jimson's crowd. They had looks on their faces that said they were in on this because they had to be, but nothing was going to make them like it.

Barb-wire Barney leaned forward and spoke to them alone. "It ain't as bad for you as you're thinkin'. Barb wire sounds the knell of the open range, yeah. And naturally you're some sentimental about that, havin' been the ones that opened it. But a year from now you'll be as glad about it as everybody else. Why? Because barb wire'll put more money in your pocket! It'll let you ranch more economical. It'll let you segregate your stock, build up your herd with blooded animals. It'll make gentlemen stock breeders out of you instead of hit-and-miss ranchers. It'll take the gambling out of your business, and leave you make more money with less cows on account your pure bloods will pack away twice as many beefsteaks under their glossy hides as what your scrubby native beef does. So get that look off your faces like you're takin' medicine. This is celebration time for everybody. Three cheers for barb wire!"

"Where is it? Where's the barb wire?" The questions were bellowed at him from a hundred throats.

"It's past due now," Barney told them. "It'll be here any minute, a whole trainload of it, planked down smack on our sidetrack. When Deuce Le Deux took over Gunsight and quarantined the town against barb wire, here's a trick he never thought about. . . . Listen, I think I hear the train whistle blowin' now."

"Sure!" they called back at him. "Sure, she's comin' through the Sawtooth's! You can see the smoke! She's past Deep Wells. Next stop'll be our sidetrack!"

"If anybody's got any lingerin' worries about buckin' the great Deuce Le Deux," Barney shouted at them, "leave me show you somethin'." He reached down and dramatically jerked away a tarpaulin which had been covering the wagon-bed. The three sweating, scowling gunners that Deuce Le Deux had left behind him on his precipitant departure from the *Tres Pinos* ranchhouse this morning were revealed.

"Gather around, folks," Barney barked. "Look 'em over. They're tied; they can't bite. Three ferocious gunmen that we lassooed with barb wire! Look at the one with the yaller eyes. Don't he look fierce?"

The din that went up from the jostling crowd wasn't good natured. There were cries of "Shoot 'em . . . lynch 'em."

Barney scotched the lynch talk in a hurry. "Men," he said, "first there was the railroad. Now, barb wire. Next there will come law to Sweetgrass Basin. Not too much law. Just enough to let you all live in peace with your neighbors and enjoy the fruits of your toil safe from gun-scum like Deuce Le Deux. The West is growin' up, boys, and you got to grow with it. Lynchin's plumb old fashioned. I'll tell you what we'll do. The first car of barb wire we unload, we'll shove these three in the empty with just enough water to last 'em till they

get to Chicago. On the outside of the car we'll nail a 'Do not disturb' sign like they put on your door in fancy hotels when you want to sleep late. When these three pretty boys get to Chicago they'll mend their ways or they'll go quick to jail. How's it sound?"

Their cheers told him they were with him in this too. But then their cheers tapered off. They commenced to ask each other perplexed, uneasy questions. The thing that was bothering them was this: The train was in sight now. It was coming fast, trailing smoke in a black cloud. But the locomotive wasn't pulling any solid line of boxcars loaded with barbed wire. It wasn't pulling any boxes at all. It was only pulling a caboose!

As the locomotive whistled and started grinding for a stop, Lige and Barb-wire Barney were bombarded with nervous questions.

"Nothin' to worry about," Barney assured them. "Likely the train crew left the cars in Deep Wells, and they come on here to make sure we had our sidetrack in."

The locomotive pulling the red caboose steamed to a stop and stood *chugging* on the rails. There was a concerted movement toward the track. But that excited rushing movement stopped almost before it started. It stopped because, suddenly, gun barrels bristled from the windows of the caboose and the locomotive cab. Within one of the windows a familiar face was framed: Deuce Le Deux's!

IN THE portentous hush that clamped down, Deuce's voice sounded, addressing the crowd. "Three of the guns you see cold-beaded on you are shotguns. You don't have to guess what they're loaded with. I'll tell you. Barbed wire chopped up in little pieces. Barbed-wire hash, you might call it; and it'll make hash out of easy a couple dozen of you if we have to blast."

Leaving that doom-freighted warning to ring in their ears, Deuce came out on the rear platform. One hand rested on the butt of his pearl-handled six-gun. The other hung by its thumb from the pocket of his beaded vest. His cynical glance came to rest on Lige Carson, the doctor and the ranchers who were grouped around Barb-wire Barney's buckboard. "I know you've got men spotted on the ridges," Deuce said. He laughed harshly. "They won't do you any good. They're too far off for accurate shooting, and if they should try, the casualties here from my guns would be enormous."

He repeated the word "Enormous." Again he laughed. "So the Indigo Kid is that fine upstanding rancher, Lige Carson! Nice fight you put up, Kid. But not nice enough. The fighting's over now and Deuce gun-rules the Basin. Your men on the ridges were set to stop anything short of a train, weren't they? You were so sure of your barbed wire. I was sure of it, too. I had men spotted at Deep Wells. They sidetracked your fence cars there and *persuaded* the train crew to come on here with the caboose. This side the Devil's Teeth they stopped and picked me up and some more of my gunners. We were on the way back from makin' a second call on you, Carson. There was no one home the second time. You'll be interested to know we fired every buildin' on the place."

A distant explosion sounded, to be followed by three more in quick succession.

"That's at your place, too," Deuce informed. "I left a couple the boys there with instructions to dynamite whatever wouldn't burn." His predatory eyes sought out Hally Harper and Salt-grass Jimson. "So you slow-pokes made up your minds at last where your interests lay? Glad to see it. Saves me extra trouble. Now I can deal with you all at once. You'll be as interested as Lige to know that your places are bein' burned out, too. . . . Listen!"

A more distant concussion booming wafted over the plain.

"That'll be your place, Hally. . . . Yours is too far to sound all this way, Salt-grass, but take my word for it—it's gettin' the same careful attention."

Deuce Le Deux's eyes ranged fiercely over the crowd. "The same goes for the rest of you! All of you that have shacks worth the powder to blow 'em up—by the time you turn tail and sneak away home from here, you'll find 'em blown up! I'm makin' a clean sweep of Sweetgrass Basin. My advice to you is not even to go home from here, but just to start leavin' the basin the shortest way possible. That's the only way to assure that you don't get blown up with your houses. But if you want to go back and

pick up your kids and the rest of your woman folks, that's all right by me. (I ain't Simon Legree. But I know what I want, see? And what I want is for Sweetgrass Basin to be repopulated with docile labor. Why there's immigrants coming to New York, my eastern agents tell me, that have had it so tough in Europe they'll be glad to work fourteen hours a day every day in the week for me in Sweetgrass Basin. And if any more eastern agitators—" his glance sought out Dr. Clyde Arington—"come here to stir up trouble, I'll have 'em wrapped in barbed wire the minute they set foot in the basin, and rolled down a long hill."

His glance shifted to Myrna Chilcott, who sat her horse, white-faced and trembling. "You're in the wrong crowd, aren't you, my dear? I invite you to join me in my private car."

Myrna said the first coherent words then that anybody had spoken in answer to Deuce's stunning declarations. Her voice was taut and low; but it carried. "I'm where I belong," she said.

"Suit yourself, my dear," Deuce Le Deux purred. "There's always tomorrow." He looked toward Barb-wire Barney, and his voice didn't purr now; it turned hard as flint. "You'll let my three men go," he said.

Barney looked helplessly at Lige, and Lige nodded. Barney let them go. There was nothing else he could do.

The three gunners, led by Topaz Bane, swaggered truculently aboard the caboose, and Deuce said, "This about cleans everything up around here. . . . Except one more thing, I'll just collect me three prisoners for the three you had of mine. I'll take Lige Carson, Dr. Arington, and Barb-wire Barney. Law's come to Gunsight, or hadn't you heard? We aim to celebrate it by stagin' three hangings. The hang ropes will be barbed wire."

That barbed wire seemed to catch the throats of every man and woman there. They stood in stunned silence. Lige Carson, the doctor, and Barney swapped quick despairing glances. The same thought was in the mind of each. It was a tragic thought. They might resist Deuce's demands. There was a chance they might gun their way out of this. But only at an appalling loss of life to the basin folks close-packed on every side. From shotguns, rifles, and six-guns sudden death would pour in.

Lige answered for the three of them, "I reckon you're calling the turn Deuce—"

"No!" a voice shouted from the crowd. "We won't let him take you!"

Stark silence waved in, and Deuce chopped, "Who said that?"

What happened next was gratifying evidence to Lige and Barney that their "one for all and all for one" talk concerning the stringing of barbed wire in Sweetgrass Basin, had made an impression.

Something like a hundred voices blared out at Deuce Le Deux, saying in effect, "We all said it!"

One of them was even bold enough to amplify that statement of basin solidarity. "You don't take a single man on board your hell-freight! And if you want to shoot, go ahead. You'll get a lot of us, but we'll by-god get all of you!"

DEUCE LE DEUX was the kind of gambler who never took chances to get all in one lump what he knew he could get safely a little at a time.

"You win this one deal," he said. "It doesn't matter. I have plans. I can wait a little longer. And remember the rest of what I've said. All of you. Get out of here today or get planted tomorrow! All except you, Miss Chilcott." He bowed. "I have very special plans for you. Better change your mind and come along with me now. Your father will be annoyed I am sure when he learns of the company you keep."

Myrna's anger choked her voice; she couldn't speak.

"That's all then," Deuce Le Deux said. "All for now." He swept them once more with his cold and intolerably insolent glance, then stepped back inside the caboose.

In the locomotive cab the engineer was gagged, his ears were plugged, his eyes were bound. But his hands were free to reverse throttle. The side-rods clanked, steam spurted. The "hell-train" started backing up . . . gathered speed.

As it faded in heat-shimmering distance someone voiced a wild hope, "Them men on guard at the ridge—maybe they've snuck around and tore up the track!"

"No chance," Lige said bleakly. "Deuce Le Deux has tricked them into leaving their positions before. They had strict orders to stay where they were this time. I was forseein' every trick but this 'hell-train.'"

"Then we're beat!"

The tragic hopeless tone of the talk that welled up indicated that everyone else thought so too.

Then Lige Carson's voice broke through. It was still bleak, and it seemed to bear out the utter hopelessness they all were feeling.

"No two ways about it," he said, "Deuce put things up to us uncommon final. We've got to get out. We've no homes, no land we can work. We have to leave Sweetgrass Basin. What else is there for us? Most of you aren't gunmen. You're ranchers, farmers. You can't fight gunmen on their own terms. And there aren't enough of my Blue Blazers to meet Deuce's hirelings in showdown gun action. So, like Deuce says, we'll all leave today to keep from gettin' planted tomorrow."

Their drooping spirits hit a sad new low. Lige Carson was right, of course. He was only expressing what they themselves had been thinking. But it was a blighting shock nevertheless. They had looked for the Indigo Kid, somehow, to pull another miracle from his hat.

Then Lige spoke again. Still his voice was bleak. But it was charged with a dynamic appeal that struck through their fog of futility to leave them tinglingly alive, stirred, lifted to new heights of hope.

What Lige said was, "When we leave the basin we'll go to Devil's Pasture! There we'll live and plot our comeback. It'll be a quick comeback and a lastin' one!

Chapter XVIII

DESERT TREK

BIG ranchers, little ranchers, nesters—all the disinherited men, women, and children of Sweetgrass Basin—came to Devil's Pasture by night. Burdened with whatever of their household goods had escaped destruction at the hands of Deuce Le Deux's dynamite wreckers, they came stealthily, covering their tracks. They came in small independent groups, each group organized and conducted by one of the Blue Blazers.

Those groups that were close enough made the desert trek through the Devil's Teeth Range in a single night. Those farther away hid out for one day in the desert and made it the second night—all except two who were claimed as victims by the treacherous slide-rock slopes. In spite of all the care that could be exercised, the brittle rock that had been crumbling away for ages from the Devil's Teeth pinnacles, and that now lay in quicksilver suspension on the slopes, was sometimes jarred to avalanche motion. Hard as iron and sharp as glass, the black volcanic slag would seeth and roll. Twice during this migration from Sweetgrass Basin, the roar of sliding rock choked off a human scream, and when the disturbed surface found its balance again, it had leveled a grave.

But there was no thought of turning back because of the Devil's Teeth perils. On they plodded, with their packs; their house and barnyard animals: cows, burros, sheep, goats, chickens, dogs, rabbits; and a hodge-podge of things not so useful. Almost every woman, for instance, carried pathetic mementos of a happier, safer life in the settled East—shoe buckles set with brilliants, a chemise of faded ribbons and yellowed lace, daguerrotypes in frames of maroon plush and tarnished silver, a child's china doll, a baby's broken rocking chair. . . . Before the desert trek was over many of these things had to be discarded and destroyed by the migrants in order to leave no clues of their passing. But in the end the disinherited ranch folks all were sheltered within the rock-girt confines of Devil's Pasture. All except three. Those two who had been killed by the slide-rock. And one other —Myrna Chilcott.

Myrna had gone from the barbed wire meeting on the *Tres Pinos* ranch—as she said—to plead with her father to break his unnatural alliance with Deuce Le Deux. She would be back, she said, with him or without him. Lige Carson waited the allotted time. She did not come back.

Dr. Clyde Arington was the only one to voice disappointment in her. Lige Carson and the others seemed to take it in their stride.

"It was a lot to expect of her," was Lige's unemotional comment.

The doctor said no more about it, reasoning that the blow to Lige was greater than he let on. He tried to concentrate on Carolina Gilpin, her quiet courage, her beauty grounded deep in character.

The doctor made his trip to the Pasture with Jim Juniper's party—the suicide party, Jim called it, because their burros were

loaded down with dynamite, and one misstep in the treacherous slide-rock could blow them all to kingdom-come.

Jim was noncommital about the dynamite. "Comes in handy," he mumbled, "and Deuce Le Deux ain't the only one who knows how to use it."

The sure-footed little desert canaries made it safely through the moonlit desolation. Under the highest, blackest slope of all, Jim Juniper looked up and waved out his arm.

"You wouldn't know, Doc, on account you were blindfolded last time, but we're on the home stretch now."

Within another couple minutes the doctor knew it well enough, because, rounding a jutting crag, they found themselves in a canyon pocket where the wind blew with a banshee wailing and black sand moved in ceaseless swirls over the ground and in the air.

The doctor's interest quickened. So here was the source of the black sand which he had been carrying in his medicine bottle!

Jim Juniper, leaning into the windy blasts, squinting his eyes against swirling dust and sand, said, "Now you can understand why the Devil's Pasture makes such a top prime hideout. This sand keeps movin' . . . always movin'. Somethin' about the way the hot air comes driftin' down atween these rocky walls, I reckon, and meets the cooler air at the bottom. Anyhow the wind always blows. It blots out tracks as fast as you make 'em. Look back. An army could come through here and leave no trail."

"Who discovered the pasture," the doctor inquired, "Lige?"

"Nope. She's a old longrider's paradise, Doc. A stopover on the owlhoot trail that runs from the Shoshones under the Montana line all the way south to the Rio Grande. Known only to the most select of the long-haired gentry, Doc. She's a old Indian hideout original. Leastways there's Indian ruins there, houses chiseled in the stone, with chips of pottery layin' around and such. The story goes that Coronado, that bloody butcher, way back in 1500, heard about the Devil's Pasture, and wasted an army tryin' to locate it. He was wastin' his time too, on account gold was all he ever wanted, and there never was any gold there, only rest and peace and safety for the oppressed. Which is better'n gold to my way of thinkin'."

THE doctor nodded. "I'm betting it was you who showed the Devil's Pasture to Lige."

"Charlie the Ute showed me and I showed Lige, yeah. It was this way. I knowed Lige's father. Open-range, they called him. Grand old man. I used to lay over with him a month or two out of about every year just to keep my hand in on workin' cows. Used to have a ranch of my own, you know. I'd of stayed longer, but a couple of months was all I could risk it. What passes for the law would be catchin' up with me about then. Well, Doc, in all them years Open-range never asked me no questions. He was always glad to see me come, and sorry to see me go. By jumps and starts, I watched his kid—that's Lige—grow up. Bein' that the Old Man was such a top prime fella, when the time come I could do his son a good turn, I done it. I showed him the Devil's Pasture and helped him organize his Blue Blazers."

"You remember the time I was at the Pasture?" the doctor recalled. "And Gilpin died under my hands—"

"You're fishin' fer the info on the barb wire sign I reckon. I've talked with Lige about it since. You pulled a fast one there, Doc. I don't mind tellin' you, when you flashed that hunk of barb wire, you saved your life. We figgered the Indigo Kid had give it to you, and while he wasn't trustin' you yet with the keys to the Pasture, he was buildin' you up to become one of us."

"That's the way I was playin' the cards," the doctor admitted. "If you've talked to Lige maybe he's told you about this also. I was tagged with two more of those barb wire signs—"

Jim Juniper laughed. "By Lige Carson! The Kid had considerable advantage thataway. By bein' two men at the same time, he could tag about anyone he wanted to. That one in your med'cal c'tificut, Lige stuck it there just afore he pointed it out to you, while you and Ed Chilcott and that gal of Ed's was all standin' around. That night in the Crystal Palace he tagged you and Deuce Le Deux both." The old longrider cleared his throat. He hemmed and hawed a moment, then said, "Doc, that gal of Ed's I jus' mentioned, I've seen her grow up too, right alongside Lige. I don't care what they say about her, Doc, she's all right. She's got good stuff. Takes after her mother that's

dead now. She's all right; you know what I mean?"

"I know," the doctor said. "She and Lige make a good match."

Jim Juniper looked at him from the corner of his eyes. "Yeah," I reckon," he said.

The doctor changed the conversation. "What I'm really curious about is how we get into the Devil's Pasture from this sand-blast canyon. We're running into a blank wall ahead and I don't see any opening."

"It's smack in front of your nose, Doc."

"I must be blind."

"Watch close, Doc, and see another miracle—Samson pullin' the wall down."

Jim Juniper unhorsed and approached the wall. His hands reached out, pulled . . . he started removing the wall block by block! The doctor gasped—and hurried to help him.

"Nothin' to it, you see?" Jim said. "Each block of rock is chiseled to fit. The wind blows the sand in the cracks within ten minutes after the entrance has been closed and makes it look like it hadn't been touched for a thousand years."

From beyond the wall a voice sounded out, hollow and muffled in the sand-blown night.

Jim answered the challenge, and the work of carving out an entrance redoubled, helped now by unseen hands from the other side.

When the work was completed there was an opening in the wall big enough for a horse and rider to pass through. Jim conferred briefly with the inside guard, then he took his party through, leaving it for the men on guard duty to rebuild the wall from the inside.

Through the jet black tunnel—an ancient watercourse—they proceeded, and burst out into the moonlit fairyland of that water-fed, cliff-locked valley, Devil's Pasture. The sweet smell of grass and balsam pine assailed the nostrils. The murmur of voices came to their ears.

Men, women, and children were everywhere. Some were sleeping in the grass where they had dropped, exhausted, upon first entering this haven. Others moved about, like wondering children.

A disturbing thought came to the doctor. They were safe now, these refugees from Sweetgrass Basin. But how long could this last? Devil's Pasture wasn't vast enough to support this many people indefinitely. And even if it could, there would be many of them with temperaments unfitted for a life, however idyllic, shut off from the rest of the world. They would fret, and in the end, go away. It would be only a matter of time then until someone talked too much, and this haven for the oppressed which had existed for centuries would become the mecca of curiosity seekers. Or what was worse, it would shrivel under the blight of Deuce Le Deux's vengeance! The Gunsight chief, the doctor knew, had been making every effort to ferret out the location of Devil's Pasture. The place was no imaginary realm to Deuce Le Deux. From basin brands which he had pirated, he had lost too many unimaginary cows for the Pasture to be anything but real to him.

SOON after entering the Pasture the doctor was airing this problem with Lige Carson. They sat on a rock near the waterfall that came splashing down from its underground channel in the high cliff wall. The waterfall made soft fantastic music, and caressed with its cooling spray.

The doctor sighed. "All this—in the middle of a desert—I still can hardly believe it."

"That's how they all feel—now," Lige said. "But how long before they become restless; a week, a month? How long do you give them, Doc?"

"Not long," the doctor said soberly. "Too many ill-assorted people living too close together. Something will have to break. Another thing I've been worrying about. This many people can't just step out of the world. Somewhere they'll leave a clue behind them. Deuce Le Deux has been hunting night and day for this place. Sooner or later he'll find it."

Lige Carson leaned close. "Sooner," he said. "Almost immediate, in fact."

"What?" The doctor stared in alarm. "How do you know?"

"He'll find us," Lige said slowly, "because you'll lead him here."

The doctor answered in good western vernacular, "You're makin' less sense fast!"

"Listen," Lige said, "I saw this through to the last detail before I engineered the migration. I know we can't last here indefinite. Sooner or later we have to have an accounting with Deuce Le Deux. So what do we do? We chose the place and the time. If

a man's got to have a fight against odds, that's good horse sense, isn't it?"

"Yes, but—"

"While you're away leadin' Deuce here, we'll be makin' adequate preparations to receive him. What do you think that dynamite's for? What do you think we've built up our arsenal here for? Once we get Deuce Le Deux and his pack hammerin' at our doors, our troubles are over. The most ticklish part is getting him here when and where we want him, with a sizable part of his men. That's where you come in."

"I still don't see—"

"You will. Listen. Deuce has always had a sardonic likin' for you ever since that first night in the Crystal Palace when you stood up to his men and ended up by killin' Al Ochs."

"The kind of liking Deuce has for me won't keep him from killing me on sight!" the doctor protested.

"Not on sight," Lige disagreed. "He'll give you a chance to talk first, and that's where we'll beat him. Deuce is so depraved, so entirely cynical that he thinks everyone else is too. That's his Achilles' heel. How many times have you heard him say, 'Every man has his sell-out price'? You begin to get it? Bein' the kind of jungle realist he is, he'll listen when you come to sell me out, and lead him and his men to Devil's Pasture."

"You're right," the doctor said, softly. "I do believe you're right."

CHAPTER XIX

DEVIL'S PASTURE

IT WAS the next night before the doctor entered Gunsight. Under cover of darkness he had no difficulty in making his way to the livery barn that Deuce Le Deux had taken over for temporary quarters while his new and bigger Crystal Palace was being built.

Deuce had a makeshift bar set up. He had card tables in the box-stalls, with empty beer kegs to sit on. He was having the hay cleared out of the loft to make a dance floor. Swinging lanterns substituted for the crystal chandeliers.

The doctor walked in briskly through the half open sliding door in front and presented himself at the bar before anyone could challenge him.

"I want to see the chief," he told Barrelhouse.

The bartender stared with his eyes popping. By that time a dozen others were staring too. Hymie Wert was the first to do anything about it. He came tearing across the floor from a stud game in one of the box-stalls. There was murder in his eyes—and in his hand that tugged for his six-gun.

He shoved his bullet-head close, and that six-gun came clear only a fraction of a second slower than the doctor's leaded watch lifted free of his pocket. The watch whirled on the end of its chain, *chunked* against Hymie's close-cropped head, and Hymie—and his six-gun—dropped to the floor. The doctor let Hymie lie where he fell, but he picked up the six-gun.

He sighed. "Getting to be an old story with Hymie and me."

"What do you want here, Doc?" Topaz Bane slashed.

"Want to see Deuce on important business."

"You can state your business with me."

"I *could*, yes."

"Doc, your life ain't worth a plugged *centavo* here. You know that, don't you?"

"Yours isn't either as long as I hold this gun. Are you calling Deuce for me?"

"Callin' nobody for you!"

The doctor's hand tightened on the gun butt. "Brace yourself, Topaz."

The top gunner's yellow eyes blazed. "You wouldn't shoot."

"You sure about that?"

"Plenty sure."

"So was Al Ochs," the doctor said. His eyes narrowed. "Don't say I didn't warn you, Topaz—"

"All right," Topaz cut in. "But I still think you're bluffin'."

The doctor smiled again that hard way he had learned since coming to Sweetgrass Basin. "But you don't want to find out bad enough to get shot, is that it?"

Deuce Le Deux received the doctor in the saddle room that had been cleaned out for use as a private office. Tettering on the toes of his polished boots, thumbs hooked in the pockets of his beaded vest, the Gunsight boss regarded the doctor in cold speculation.

"Doctor Death, I believe." His voice was more than a little mocking.

"That gives me an idea," the doctor said. He reached in his pocket and brought out two small bottles of pills. Holding the bottles over the table, he shook one pill from each.

"There you are, chief," he said. "A pink pill and a green one. Make your choice. Whichever one you choose, I'll eat the other."

"What's the idea?"

"One of the pills is poison. It'll kill you in ten minutes."

"What's the idea?" Deuce repeated harshly.

"I merely want to impress it on you," the doctor said, "that I'm here on serious business. I'm even willing to gamble my life on it."

"You've been gamblin' it, Doc, since the second you stepped inside this town. Now feed it down."

"All right, here it is," the doctor said. "I'm prepared to take you to the Devil's Pasture—at a price."

Quick avid interest competed with the cynicism in the gun-chief's eyes. "What makes you think I might want to go there?"

"Because Lige Carson is there—and everybody else that you've run out of Sweetgrass Basin."

"How would you know about that?"

"Because I was there too."

"Why aren't you there now?"

"Because I had enough of it. Listen, I've lived all my life in the East. I'm used to life under the bright lights. It was bad enough here in Gunsight, but in that mountain hole —you think I want to spend the rest of my life locked up in a lost canyon? That's the hopeful future the rest are contemplating. But a steady diet of your beef didn't appeal to me."

"Then how come you didn't hit back for your city lights?"

The doctor scotched that one with the answer he and Lige had decided upon. "If you must know," he said, with just the right shade of defiance, "they took my license away from me. There's no living for me in the East. But I'm still a good enough gunshot doctor."

"A drunken doctor," Deuce said harshly, "ain't a hell of a lot of good anywhere."

The doctor looked at him coolly. "I'm figuring on making enough from you on this Devil's Pasture deal to quit doctoring for good."

Deuce Le Deux's cynical eyes returned his stare. "Double turn-coat, huh? First you sell me out to the Kid and now you figure to sell him out to me."

"Both ends against the middle, I think they call it in this country," the doctor said calmly. "Just for the record, though, the Indigo Kid was putting the well-known squeeze on me. There wasn't much else I could do than what I did. Don't be too sure I'm sellin' him out though. I'm not—unless I get my price. You were the one who told me every man had his price, remember? All right, but mine's a high one."

"Your price, Doc," the gun-boss sneered, "is just whatever I might want to make it. Do you think you stand a show of gettin' out of here alive if I don't clear the road for you?"

"You know me pretty well by this time," the doctor said flatly. "Have I been reckless with my life or haven't I? You'll make it worth my while to stay alive, or I don't give much of a damn whether I get out of here or not. In that case, the secret of Devil's Pasture dies with me." A sly smile creased his face. "They do say there's gold there, Deuce."

Deuce smiled too, with the thin lips alone. The eyes remained as cynically hard as ever. "Doc," he said, "you're right to chuck your profession. You were born to *cut* throats, not sew 'em up. Siddown. You didn't burn me quite out of all my Napoleon."

Sitting across the table from Deuce, drinking his brandy, the doctor was reminded of the time he had witnessed Ed Chilcott sealing an infamous partnership in a similar manner. He thought of Myrna too, and wondered if, offhand, he might put a question that would net him information without revealing to Deuce that the matter was of absorbing interest to Lige Carson.

"What have you got to sell, Doc?" Deuce broke in on his thoughts. "You're not tryin' to tell me Lige Carson was dumb enough to let you walk out without hittin' you over the head first, or at least blind-foldin' you? Shake it out, Doc."

"That's exactly what I'll do—shake it out." The doctor took another small bottle from his pocket, opened it, and shook out smooth-grained black sand on the table.

"Does that look like any you ever saw before?"

"You're doin' the tellin', Doc."

"It's peculiarly-grained sand, you'll notice. They blind-folded me, of course. But right outside the Pasture we went through a stretch of sand where the wind blew hard. Afterwards I shook out my clothes and collected this sand in the bottle. I can't point out the precise entrance to the Devil's Pasture, but I can find my way back to the place where this sand blows. We can watch from there and see them coming and going."

IT WAS the doctor's last card. He waited tensely while Deuce rubbed a little of the black sand in the palm of his hand.

Deuce looked up suddenly. "Tell you what—I'll send you out with Topaz and a couple the others boys. If you can satisfy them, you'll satisfy me. But if this is a stall, I'll personally put the barb wire noose around your neck when they drag you back. While you're gone I'll get my boys organized for action one way or the other, accordin' to what Topaz tells me."

"Fair enough," the doctor said, and hoped he kept the triumph out of his tone. He still hadn't thought of a way to get in an offhand question about Myrna Chilcott, so he just came out with it. "What happened to Miss Chilcott?" he asked.

Deuce Le Deux's lips tightened out in a thin straight line across his predatory face. "You interested there, Doc? Forget it. So am I."

The doctor's face burned. He hoped it wouldn't show. To hide the utterly unexpected surge of emotion which swept over him, he reached out to pour himself another brandy. His hand trembled. It wasn't from too much liquor, though maybe Deuce Le Deux would think so. It was from stress of a sudden confused knowledge. He had thought he was acting in the interests of Lige Carson when he inquired about Myrna.

He knew now that this was not so. Deuce Le Deux's clubbing answer at least had the good effect of clarifying his mind on that. The doctor had asked for himself!

It was he, personally, who was interested in what had happened to Myrna. That Lige Carson, his friend, might also be interested, that Lige might have all the claims in the world on this girl, didn't alter the fact that he, Dr. Clyde Arington, loved her too!

Yes, loved her. It didn't matter that her position as daughter of the basin's largest land-owner might have spoiled her, robbed her of her frontier birthright: a fighting heart. It didn't matter that he had told her she wouldn't make a good wife. This wasn't a thing a man reasoned. It was a thing he felt. The simple fact was: he loved her. Incredible that it had taken a declaration of interest from Gunsight's boss killer to make him aware of it.

He became aware of something else, that Deuce Le Deux was looking at him with hard curiosity. He had to say something, put up a front.

He said, "You and Ed Chilcott will really have something to celebrate after I've spotted you the Devil's Pasture."

Deuce laughed harshly. "Ed Chilcott? Haven't you heard about him, Doc?"

"Heard what?"

"Why Ed Chilcott—I didn't need him any more, Doc. We been usin' each other to climb on top the rest of the basin. But now I've climbed on top of Ed."

"What do you mean?" the doctor asked, a strain of hoarseness in his voice that couldn't deny the creepy chill he felt.

"I had one of the boys put a bullet through him, Doc. I forget exactly—Topaz Bane, I believe it was."

ON THE trail into the Devil's Teeth with Topaz Bane and two of Deuce's "other boys," it wasn't the thought of a bullet in the back that dominated the doctor's mind. It was concern for Myrna. Range-pirate though her father had been, he had remained a protection to her. But now that he was dead, what defense had she against Deuce Le Deux? The fact that she hadn't joined the others on their trek to Devil's Pasture, now brought up sinister possibilities. Perhaps Deuce had forcibly restrained her. She loathed and despised this man, the doctor had heard her say. But Deuce decidedly didn't return those sentiments. It was more than possible that his desire for Myrna had hurried his hand in the killing of her father.

The doctor tried to find out something more from Topaz about the tragic affair. But Topaz wouldn't talk.

The doctor went on, leading the way

through the desert wastes, skirting the dangerous slide-rock slopes, climbing, descending, turning. Occasionally he would stop to point out some bit of refugee wreckage as evidence that they were on the right trail—evidence planted by the doctor himself on his trip from the pasture into town.

At Topaz Bane's order he gauged their movements so that they arrived by night under the morose brow of that king-slope just beyond the whining sand. Around the jutting cliff and into the black-sand canyon the doctor led them. At a place on the canyon wall, following instructions given by Lige, he started climbing. Some thirty feet up he came to a sheltered ledge.

"Trail's end," he said, wearily. "Now all we have to do is wait and watch."

It wasn't long before they saw what they came to see. Dimly, through the moonlight and the swirling sand, they saw men approach the solid rock and tear it down with their hands. They saw the men disappear within the wall. They saw other men rebuild the wall, closing off the opening until anyone would have sworn an opening had never been.

It was a pre-arranged act, the doctor knew. Blue Blazer outposts had spotted their arrival, had backed the doctor's play by revealing the actual opening to the Devil's Pasture.

Topaz Bane got up from where he crouched. "Looks like the McCoy, Doc," he clipped. "We'll scout the set-up a little, and then head back."

The first time they took out for rest on the way back, Topaz Bane said, "Reckon we're far enough away now to risk a gunshot." He grimaced at his two hardcases, then questioned the doctor starkly. "Where do you want it, through the pan or the pantry?"

"You're not even funny," the doctor told him. This was a moment he had been expecting, but he didn't actually feel as confident as he made his voice sound.

Topaz continued, "You're not dumb. You know what happens to a man when he's no more use to the chief."

"Sure," the doctor told him. "The same thing that'll happen to you if anything happens to me."

"Quit tryin' to talk yourself out of it, Doc. You've lived your useful life. We don't need your help to find our way back to the Devil's Pasture again."

"You need it to find the gold though," the doctor said.

"Huh? What gold?"

"The gold in Devil's Pasture."

Topaz Bane swapped uncertain glances with the other two men. "Deuce didn't say nothin' about no gold."

"I'm sayin' somethin' about it."

"Doc, you been bettin' busted straights ever since you hit the basin."

"That's only what you think. You're not sure."

"Doc," Topaz said, sourly, "I'd ought to let you have it."

The doctor yawned. He knew he was over the rough water now. "You do," he said, "and you're certainly going to be a disappointment to Deuce."

"You win," Topaz said.

"Smart boy," the doctor commended him. "You've just saved both our lives."

"First thing we get back to Gunsight," Topaz threatened, "I'll find out from Deuce if I did."

When they got back to Gunsight the doctor wasn't kept long in doubt of his fate. His gag about gold in Devil's Pasture worked just as well with Deuce Le Deux as it had with Topaz Bane. Not that the gun-boss fell for it hook, line, and sinker. He had shrewd doubts, in fact. But the remotest possibility that the doctor could point the way to gold, gave him a living value. His execution was deferred until such time as he could be forced to make good or renege on his claim.

With this fingernail grip on life the doctor was carried along with the army that moved on Devil's Pasture. He had no illusions about his position with the army. Though in appearance he was one of Deuce Le Deux's staff officers, he was in reality a prisoner.

There was one other prisoner in the gun-heavy mob that rode out from the livery stable saloon—Myrna Chilcott.

She, too, was granted the appearance of freedom. She rode her calico pony in the van of Deuce's marauders, with Deuce, Topaz, the doctor, and a few others. The doctor kept stealing sidelong glances at her. She was like another person. Gone was her pert gayety, her fine lust for life. Her shoul-

ders drooped. Her face was pale from the anguish of tortured days, sleepless nights.

But there was enough life left in her eyes for hatred. Whenever her glance crossed with the doctor's, it was to scorch him with her scorn. There was something the doctor had to tell her. Not about his love. That could wait. It was something she had to do to save her life. Her presence with this war party had grievously upset his calculations. He had to talk to her. They had to work out a plan of escape together.

But when the opportunity came to snatch a word, she beat him down with talk of her own, flayed him with words that jetted in a hoarse-whispered burst.

"I thought Deuce Le Deux was low! I thought I could never hate any man a tenth as much. But you—you're unspeakably lower! Deuce is driven by a criminal mind.

"At least he has that excuse. But you, with your advantages of education, a cultural background—what excuse is there for you? No mental twist impels you. You were free to choose—and you came back—to sell out Lige Carson—and all your friends—and me—to the man who killed my father—"

SHE broke off as Deuce Le Deux pushed his horse in between theirs. "Well, well," he mocked, "old friends will get together. How's the weather? I don't think it'll rain, do you?"

They rode on, out of the range and onto the greasewood benches that climbed to the desert desolation of the Devil's Teeth pinnacles, with the doctor watching like a hawk for a chance to speak to Myrna again. He had to speak to her. Her life depended on his warning.

Unhappily, he tried to make allowances for her expressed opinion of him. It was only natural that she should think this way, he told himself. All the facts indicated that he was engaged in a despicable sell-out. But he had to keep up this fiction! The ultimate well-being of everyone, including Myrna, depended upon his success in establishing himself now as utterly without conscience or scruples. They were well into the Devil's Teeth Range before another opportunity came to exchange a few words with her.

"Stay as close to me as you can," he warned. "Your life depends upon it! As soon as it's dark, I'll make a break for us to get away. We're riding into death . . . we have to get away—"

Deuce Le Deux came ramming his horse between theirs, as before. He overheard the last part of the conversation.

"Sorry to break up your elopement, Doc," he said. There was a smirk on his face, and he called a halt and gave orders for the doctor to be tied in saddle.

"Nothin' like knowin' a man's where you think he is," Deuce said further, as they swung into the march again.

The doctor in the despairing hours that followed had ample opportunity to test his tie-ropes. They were tight. They held him so close in saddle that he could feel every lurch and sway of his horse. And all this time the positive knowledge clubbed his brain that he and Myrna were riding into death! . . .

According to plan, Deuce brought his invading army to the Devil's Pasture by night. Leaving the bulk of his men behind good cover near the base of that last high slope, he took a picked party and scouted the way ahead. Topaz Bane acted as guide. Myrna was in that reconnoitering party. The gunchief was taking no chances of losing her. Since he had broken up her last brief conversation with the doctor, he hadn't let her out of his sight.

On foot they rounded the jutting shoulder of rock that bastioned the entrance to the canyon of singing sand. With six-guns ready for the blast, they followed Topaz Bane, slogging through the black sand, leaning into the night wind, squinting against the swirl of driven rock particles. To that vantage point high on the canyon wall, Topaz Bane climbed, and the others followed.

Topaz squatted down. "You can see everything from here, Chief."

Deuce Le Deux looked over the side into the singing inky pool of sand that overspread the canyon floor. "What do you mean you can see everything? It's dark as pitch down there."

"That don't matter," Topaz clipped. "Ahead there's where you want to look—against that bare cliff wall where the moonlight slants in. Keep watchin' and we'll spot the exact place where she opens up."

They kept watching. After a while one of the men said, hoarsely, "Look!"

Before their eyes a hole had appeared in the wall. While they watched, the black hole in the moon-shadowed wall grew larger.

"It's someone from inside the Devil's Pasture," Topaz whispered, "liftin' the rocks out to open the entrance! Now you've got the lay of it, chief. Here was my idea. We could bring our pack inside the canyon—"

The discussion of strategy was cut short by a low curse and a lunge by Deuce Le Deux. The gun-chief pulled back from the cliff ledge, his arms swinging to hold his balance.

"What's the matter?" Topaz rasped.

"The girl—she jumped off the cliff!"

"The hell!" Topaz rapped back, his gun-hand half coming up.

"Not that, you damn fool!" Deuce stopped him.

"Well, if you want to catch her, jump yourself."

"It's dark as a mine pit down there!"

"It's deep sand," Topaz said. "You couldn't hurt yourself. Here—watch."

He crowded forward and jumped. They saw the blackness swallow him. The whining wind drowned any sound he might have made. One by one they jumped after him—all except Deuce Le Deux. He climbed down. Deuce didn't believe in taking chances, not even for a girl he might lose.

Chapter XX

DEATH DATE

INSIDE the Devil's Pasture the air crackled with tense expectancy. Lige Carson had turned the idyllic place into an armed camp. In the same stone hut where her brother had died, Carolina Gilpin had set out the doctor's surgical instruments and otherwise turned the hut into an emergency hospital. She was ready to assist the doctor when he should come.

Lige Carson's Blue Blazers, under the leadership of Jim Juniper, manned the tunnel barricades. From points of vantage on the high cliff walls that ringed the hidden paradise, the hard-bitten men of Sweetgrass Basin crouched with defending rifles, watching, waiting.

On a natural parapet—a pinnacle of black rock which reared high above the cliff ramparts, Lige Carson and Barb-wire Barney were ensconsed with night glasses. They had seen Deuce Le Deux's army approach. Their glasses couldn't penetrate the inky blackness of the sand canyon, but they could cover the entrance to that canyon. Both Lige and Barney had counted those who went in. Some time later they counted those who went out. Their counts were one short.

Lige was on the point of calling to Frijole, who had elected himself messenger boy and who had been scrambling around the rocks like a monkey for the last two days. He was going to have Frijole take word to the tunnel defenders that one person from Deuce Le Deux's reconnoitering party was still in the singing canyon. Lige suspected that Dr. Arington had staged his get-away. Lige was going to send word to the men at the tunnel entrance to be on watch for the doctor.

But from the rocky ramparts below, Frijole, in shrill excitement, called to him first.

"Jim Juniper coming!"

"Maybe," Barb-wire Barney said, "Jim's already got the Doc in tow."

But it wasn't Dr. Arington that Jim Juniper had in tow. It was Myrna Chilcott!

"She came to warn us, Indigo," Jim Juniper said. He could never call Lige anything but Indigo. "We opened the tunnel entrance part way like you said, to leave 'em know fer sure they had the right place . . . and Miss Myrna came tumblin' in."

Myrna had caught her breath by this time, at least enough to talk. "Let me tell it," she gasped. "Lige, they've come to raid this place! It's Deuce Le Deux. He'll try to kill everyone here, like—like he killed father! Oh, I know father was wrong, but I—I'm trying to make up for what father did. You have to believe me, Lige! You

have to! I couldn't get here sooner. Deuce was holding me. But I got away from him—down there in the canyon where the sand blows. Lige—you believe me, don't you?"

Lige had pressed forward and he stood now with a soothing arm about the distraught girl. "Of course I believe you, Myrna. Why wouldn't I?"

"It—it's so hard to know whom to believe any more," she said, her voice so thin and strained it barely carried. "Lige, I hate to be the one to tell you this because I know you trusted him. It—it was Dr. Arington who sold you out! I know it sounds incredible. I couldn't believe it myself. But—he rode with Deuce Le Deux! He pointed the way!"

Lige laughed in sympathetic tolerance. "Is that what's troublin' you, Myrna? Then listen, I've something good to tell you. The Doc didn't sell us out. Everything he's doin' is accordin' to plan."

"What—what plan?" she faltered.

"My plan. Mine and Barney's here. And Jim Juniper's and the Doc's. Our plan. Our plan for savin' the lives and lands of the people of Sweetgrass Basin—big ranchers, little ranchers; all of 'em. Like this, see? We knew it was only a question of time till Deuce would find us and blast us out anyway. So we decided to make it convenient for him. We decided to choose our own time and place for a finish fight. So the Doc went to Gunsight to pretend to play Judas and tip Deuce Le Deux to where we were—while we stayed here to make ready for him."

"But you can't be ready for him!" Her voice was wild. "Nothing you can do can make you ready for him! You're ranchers, farmers. . . . Deuce's men are hired gunners. He has a bigger pack of them than I ever saw. It's a full-sized army, Lige! An outlaw army. Lige! He'll kill everybody here. I've heard them planning. They've even got dynamite—"

"Dynamite's somethin' for two to play with," Jim Juniper said fiercely.

"We're not so helpless as we seem, Myrna," Lige said assuringly. "We've set a trap for Deuce."

"A trap?"

"I'll show you. Look." He turned his head in the direction he pointed. "See that pinnacle off to itself?"

"I see. I noticed it coming in. There's a slide-rock slope below it. Deuce's men are holed in just beyond it."

"That's the picture," Lige said. His voice chilled. "To make an attack on Devil's Pasture they have to pass under that avalanche slope. There's a man up there with dynamite. He can walk the whole side of the mountain down on them!"

Lige felt her tremble against his arm. He could almost feel her flesh grow cold.

In some concern, he questioned, "What's the matter, Myrna?"

"The doctor!" she gasped weakly. "He's down there with them. He's tied. Any avalanche that comes down on them will kill him too!"

Lige's breath drew in. He swapped quick tense glances with Jim and Barney.

"They may attack at any minute!" Myrna rushed on. "Don't waste any time. Signal your dynamiter to hold off."

There in the ghostly moonlight the three men stared at her. There was a feel of doom in their glance.

"We can't signal," Lige said. "Our dynamiter's on the other side of the pinnacle."

"Then don't just stand there!" Her voice was a scraping whisper. "Do something! Send somebody to tell him—"

"Myrna," Lige said starkly, "there's not a thing in God's world we can do!"

"What do you mean? Why isn't there?"

"Look! Even by moonlight you can get an idea of the canyon-gutted terrain between here and that pinnacle. It can't be approached from the slide-rock slope. There's only one way to reach it, and that's way down and around. It took our dynamiter all day to reach his position! I know because I went with him. I even helped him plant the dynamite—the dynamite he'll set off the minute Deuce launches his attack from under that slide-rock slope. The dynamite that—will kill—the doctor!"

Myrna's face was blanched under the moon. "There's no way—nothing—"

"Nothing!" Lige said.

SHE gave a little moan. He felt her body sag against his arm, and for a moment he thought she was going to faint.

Barb-wire Barney uttered a tight coughing sound, then spoke in a low burry voice. "There's somethin' I think I'd better tell.

Somethin' I reckon I'm the only one in the world who knows. It's about the Doc. Somethin' he told me back in De Kalb when we got drunk together the night before I left to come to Sweetgrass Basin. Somethin' tragic, but somethin' that ought to, in a left-handed way be comfortin' now to all of us."

HE paused, fighting for control of his voice. He wet his lips, then continued. "You've all heard him spoutin' that Shakespeare stuff about the Ides of March. The Ides of March was somebody's death date, the way I get it. *It was the Doc's death date, too!* You see—it wasn't just drunken spoutin'. You've all noticed how reckless brave he's been—like it didn't matter a whang whether he got killed or not. Well, it didn't matter, because he knew he had to die anyway! You've heard him make cracks like about livin' on borrowed time. You must have noticed how preoccupied he's been with time—watches, calendars, and things. That's because he had his death sentence before he left the East! He had it from the ablest diagnostician in Chicago."

Barney paused, wet his lips again, fought on. "Some kind of incurable disease . . . somethin' about the white blood cells, leukemia or somethin'. Anyhow, he had his death sentence. With just a few short weeks to live, he came here to Sweetgrass Basin. For several reasons. He thought I was dead. He wanted to avenge my killin', if he could. And he wanted to avenge your father's killin', Lige. Beyond that, he came here—to die! So you see, it won't matter to him much about the dynamite. He might even like it to be that way. Dynamite death is quick—and he had to die anyway. This way he'll know he's accomplished everything he came out here to do—"

Myrna looked so stricken. Barney, awkwardly, reached his plump hand to her. "Look at it this way, child. The Doc had to die anyway, see? This only makes a difference of a week or so—"

Her low words, wrung from her heart, broke in, "But a week is a lifetime! Even a day makes all the difference in the world. A single day! An hour even! Because—" then she said something that none of them, being men, had guessed; something which Carolina Gilpin, had she been present, would have known from the start—"because I love him! I love him!"

Accenting her declaration was the *cr-oo-mming* scream of a long-range rifle bullet. It was closely followed by another scream—a human one.

"One of our poor devil's mannin' the cliff-top got it!" Barney jerked.

From below them, all along the rocky ramparts that rimmed the near side of Devil's Pasture, rifles boomed, blazing out return lead. The pale muzzle flame invited more bullets from Deuce Le Deux's guns. The battle thunder rolled over the desert mountains as the fighting settled into a lead-driving give and take.

Myrna trembled, expecting to hear the world's-end roar of that dynamite blast, and the avalanche thunder.

Lige flung her what crumbs of comfort he could. "These aren't advancing shots," he said. "Deuce's men are holding their positions out there, feeling out our strength with long-range rifle fire. There's no avalanche danger until he presses the attack and advances across the slide-rock slope."

"Maybe," Myrna grasped at the hope, "your riflemen can hold him back."

"Not for long—" He broke off, smacked one big fist within the palm of his other hand. "Maybe—just maybe," he said, "I've got an idea! Hang on up there, Barney," he snapped the order. "Myrna, maybe you'd like to stay with him. Jim, you come with me."

Myrna flung herself at Lige. "What are you going to do?"

"Goin' to take my Blue Blazers out of Devil's Pasture and carry the fight to Deuce. We'll be out-numbered, outshot, and we'll have the worst of it for position. But we can try. That avalanche won't be touched off unless Deuce attacks across the slide-rock. If we can make it hot enough for him where he is, keep him from advancing . . . you see?"

"The Doc wouldn't want it that way," Barney said bluntly. "You're riskin' everything you've been struggling for by that kind of fighting, advancin' beyond your prepared positions. And for what? Another week of life maybe for the Doc. He'd be the last to ask it."

"But I'm asking it!" Myrna breathed. "Oh, I'm asking it! . . . You wouldn't have

to be too reckless. I know there are other people to think of. But we could do something, couldn't we—"

Lige and Jim Juniper were already out of their high rock nest, making their precipitant way to the cliff ramparts below. Myrna scurried after them. Once on her downward climb into darkness a cruising rifle bullet *splatted* near her against smooth rock. Ricochet lead tore through the cloth of her dress in two places, drawing blood.

She wasn't even aware she had been hit.

Below in Devil's Pasture, Lige Carson snapped more orders, rounded up his gun-crew, and led them through the tunnel and out the entrance into the dark sand canyon. They plowed forward on a stiff run. The wind blew, the sand whined; and above them bullets whined as they laced the air in both directions.

Myrna Chilcott ranged alongside Lige, keeping pace as he ran. He had ordered her to stay behind. But at the last instant she had grabbed a rifle from a surprised ranchhand, and fled through the tunnel opening into the black canyon. Now that she was here there wasn't much Lige could do about it.

With his party intact, Lige reached the canyon mouth and dispersed his men among the rocks where they began sniping. From here the rifle flashes of Deuce's mercenaries were in clear, close view.

"Aim at their flashes," Lige had instructed. "Fire and move and fire again. Make 'em think there's twice as many of us as there are. Keep your rifle barrels hot."

The Gunsight mob was quick to meet the new menace. The battle raged, as the two forces, one on either side of the avalanche slope, threaded their gun-lead in lethal criss-cross through the night. Lige ranged everywhere, bucking up his men, directing the tactics of battle.

There was enough light from the high moon that Lige could see to hold his force together. That was why he was almost immediately aware of it when Myrna ducked out on him. His searching eyes glimpsed her making her way through that deadly no-man's-land under the leaden loom of the avalanche slope. It was only a glimpse, then she disappeared in the rock-cluttered gloom.

She disappeared—leaving Lige fired with a new idea. Myrna was going to the doctor, to be with him for whatever brief space she could, at whatever cost to herself. That was her plan, Lige knew. What he did was to elaborate on her plan. Under the confusion of the fighting it was barely possible that she might succeed in squirming across that lead-torn slope and entering the enemies' camp. And so could he. Once there, he could sleuth around, locate the doctor, and pry him out from under Deuce's guard. It was at least a possibility.

Lige put Jim Juniper in charge of the fighting and followed Myrna under the glowering brow of the avalanche slope. A silent, glint-eyed wraith, he disappeared in the night.

The next person who saw him was Dr. Arington.

Knowing Deuce Le Deux's proclivity for playing safe, Lige hadn't looked for him where the gun muzzles bloomed in pale flame. The chief, Lige could be mortally certain, would be holed in at a place where he could control the fighting with the least risk to himself. Sizing up the physical layout here with a canny eye, Lige had moved farther down-slope where the *malpai* rock was weathered in cabin-sized stringers. In between the stringers of black rock were wedge-shaped rooms, low-domed caverns.

Lige scouted around. It was in one of these caverns where, attracted by the ooze of yellow light from a lantern, he exchanged meaning glances with Dr. Arington. Tied, hands and feet, the doctor sat on the floor with his back propped against the rock wall. He wasn't alone. There were two others present. But their backs were to Lige at the moment he showed himself at the cavern entrance and caught the doctor's eye.

The two were Deuce Le Deux and Myrna Chilcott. Which one had discovered the other, Lige didn't know. It didn't matter. The important thing was that they were here.

They couldn't have been here long, judging from what Deuce was saying at the moment Lige came on the scene. The Gunsight chief, gripping Myrna by the shoulder with finger-digging force, spoke in a voice of hard triumph, "We'll be in Devil's Pasture before morning. We've been feeling them out with our rifles. They haven't got anything. I've already passed out the word for the attack—"

In confirmation of his words, the firing from up the slope increased in fury. From where Lige stood he could see the gun flashes advancing toward the avalanche trough as the rifles boomed away in angry bursts. If his men on the other side failed to hold this advance, then from high, high on the lead-glimmering slope those earthquake sticks would speak; the avalanche would roll! But it wasn't Deuce's murderous crew alone who would be placed in danger. This cavern before which he stood, with Myrna, the doctor, and Deuce, all three, inside, would be buried until the end of time under a slice of sliding mountain!

In desperation Myrna tried to make the kind of explanation to Deuce that would save the doctor's life, and at the same time not imperil the people of Devil's Pasture. Her torrent of words were necessarily inconclusive. Seconds were passing. Seconds of life and death. Lige, crouching at the cavern entrance, felt the cold sweat breaking out on him. He couldn't use his gun. Deuce Le Deux and Myrna were too close together for that. They even stood in the way of the lantern; he couldn't shoot the flame from the lantern. He couldn't even make a grappling attack on the Gunsight boss. The loose slide-rock that lay on the floor between them would betray his first movement.

It was the only thing that offered even half a hope, however. He tried it. Stooping, he picked up a chunk of the rock and flung it against the side wall, hoping to deflect Deuce's attention for an instant in the wrong direction.

At the same split-wink he leaped inside the cavern, his long barreled six-gun raised for clubbing. A very little thing, an entirely unpredictable thing, defeated his intention. An unstable piece of slide-rock tilted underfoot, wrenching his ankle, throwing him sideways. He fell heavily, and in falling he threw out his hand to protect his face. His wrist cracked hard against the razor-edged rock . . . the gun was knocked from his hand.

CHAPTER XXI

BARB WIRE ROUND-UP

DEUCE LE DEUX let go of Myrna and whirled. When he saw Lige fall and lose his gun, his lips pressed in a white vicious line, and his cynical eyes squeezed half shut. His hand drove for his own holstered six. He brought the gun out and leveled down point-blank at Lige. He fired.

That first shot missed because there at the last Deuce flinched to dodge the chunk of rock which Lige had scooped from the floor and hurled at him. The bullet splayed into the floor and Lige's flung rock caromed from the ceiling.

Deuce's second shot missed too, because Lige's second rock raked in against the boss gunner's arm and landed in the midriff. Deuce grunted, staggering backwards; and Lige, who had lunged up from the floor, came ramming at him, letting go another rock from both outreaching hands.

The rock and Lige connected with Deuce at almost the same time. Two more gunshots crashed echoes around the cavern, and splintered a little rock around. But that was all, because Deuce was triggering more in frantic hope than anything else. Lige's ramming attack had carried him to the wall. Wedged there by Lige's pressing weight, they grappled for the gun.

Suddenly Lige took a chance, let go his grip on Deuce's gun and jolted the Crystal Palace boss with punches to the stomach. Deuce sagged at the waist before he could raise his gun, and Lige straightened him with a fist to the jaw.

Reflex movement spread Deuce's fingers wide . . . he dropped his gun. There was no time for either of them to pick it up. They locked in a welter of brain-reeling jabs, each standing in to the jolting blows, feeling for a knockout.

Myrna gave up trying to locate Lige's gun in the rifts and cracks and clutter of rock on the floor, and dropped down by the doctor, who had been shouting at her from the first. With a penknife she attacked the ropes which tied him. Her pearl-handled knife was more of a toy than anything else, but it hacked through the ropes, freed the doctor at about the time Lige's fist found the place it had been feeling for at the hinge of Deuce Le Deux's jaw. Deuce Le Deux walked backwards on his heels, then folded, abruptly.

It looked as though there was nothing the doctor could do to help. Then, attracted by the gunshots, Topaz Bane and Hymie Wert came slamming in from where they had

been stationed on the rifle line, close enough to keep in touch with Deuce at this cavern headquarters.

Hymie Wert's bullet-head was the first thing to butt into view through the entrance. He was almost on top of the doctor before he could stop.

Hymie let his breath out in a rasping, "Ah-h-h-h-h." He swung his gun on the doctor.

But it was only one more bad guess in a whole string of bad guesses for Hymie. While he leveled out, the doctor's watch whizzed at the end of its stout chain.

Hymie went down without firing a shot, conked on his close-cropped head in a manner that was getting to be old fashioned. He fell hard and hit his head a second time on sharp rock, and lay where he fell.

Topaz Bane, coming in behind Hymie, took no chance of tangling with the doctor's gold watch. He drew back quickly. His flat killer eyes glowed with yellow fire in the lantern light as his six-gun leveled out.

In that fatal instant, the doctor read his finish in the glinting gun barrel. There was no guessing about it. Topaz Bane had him dead to rights. There wasn't a thing the doctor could do to save himself.

But someone else could do something. And did. Myrna!

Long ago it was said, and has since been often repeated: greater love hath no man than to give up his life for another. Then what of Myrna? She was young, with the richness and fullness of life as yet untasted. She had, conceivably, many years to live. And yet she threw them away—for a man whom she knew had only a week or two, at best, to live.

What she did was a simple thing; a simple, brave and noble thing. She threw herself in between the doctor and Topaz Bane's gun . . . she took the bullet that had been marked to kill the doctor.

Her action threw Topaz a little off his trigger stride. His next shot struck neither Myrna nor the doctor. But so far as Myrna knew anything about it, that first shot had been enough. She crumpled to the floor with a low moan, her hands clutching to her chest, where the blood was sopping through her clothes.

Those two shots were Topaz Bane's last. By that time Lige, at the other end of the cavern, had recovered Deuce Le Deux's dropped gun. He killed Topaz Bane with one fury-directed shot.

Through the reeking gun smoke the doctor and Lige peered into each other's stricken faces. Then on the echoes of that gun roar came another roar from the far outside—a tumultuous muffled booming from high up the slide-rock slope.

"Dynamite!" Lige bit off the word.

They bent together, picked up Myrna's inert body.

"Can we make it?" the doctor jerked.

"Don't know. . . . We can try. Let me pick the way. I know how the ground lays."

OUTSIDE they hurried, carrying Myrna, being as gentle about it as possible, but being mindful too that with the side of the mountain walking down on them, every fractional second counted.

With the wafting away of the dynamite roar, came that other even more deadly sound: the downward rush of uncounted millions of black rocks, hard as iron, sharp as glass, gathering speed as they rolled, touching off more rocks, and more, and more as the avalanche swelled and fanned out to cover both flanks of the slope.

Lige and the doctor climbed like madmen. Where they were, the course of the down-plunging rock would be constrained, hemmed in between cliff walls. If they could climb high enough, the rocks would flow in a well defined channel below them, in a veritable avalanche gorge. If they could climb high enough! And fast enough!

Closer and closer came the Devil's torrent, louder and louder the avalanche roar. Lige and the doctor kept climbing. It was

all they could do. They would be climbing at the last, when the rock was around them with a roar that was out of the world. They would be climbing to death. Or to life. . . .

They climbed to life!

While the earth shook, they lay on a *malpai* ledge, gasping, trembling with exhaustion, shielding Myrna with their bodies against ricochet rocks which filled the air. The avalanche rose high in the trough below them, and died away, until the roar and the trembling were gone from the mountain and there was only an occasional metalic slap of rock on rock to prove that the mountain had ever been fluid.

The avalanche was over. The slide-rock was again in balance. And they lived!

Myrna, though, lived feebly.

"Can we cross the slide-rock?" the doctor asked. "If we could get her to Devil's Pasture where I could tend her properly . . . then maybe." He shrugged helplessly. "You never know for sure."

"We can cross all right," Lige said. "Come on."

On their way they saw shadowy figures running into the night.

"It appears we aren't the only ones who got away," Lige observed. "Just as well, I reckon. Deuce's men that were caught by the avalanche never knew what hit them, and the ones that got away know so terrifyingly what it was they missed, that they'll never be a menace any longer to Sweetgrass Basin."

The doctor's sorrow over Myrna was as deep as a man's sorrow can be, and yet he found the heart to spare a fleeting thought to three who had died. "In spite of hell," he said, "I kind of hated to go away and leave them there."

"They were all dead," Lige said, bleakly. "I killed Topaz with a bullet. Hymie Wert killed himself when he went down for the last time under your watch. He hit his head on sharp rock. He was dead all right. I was where I could see. And Deuce Le Deux—one of Topaz's own wild bullets finished him where he lay, knocked out, on the floor."

IN THE stone hut in Devil's Pasture death breathed close for Myrna Chilcott. For other Sweetgrass Basin folks, hope and dreams had merged with reality; life shimmered before them with rainbow promise. But for Myrna, in that crude little makeshift hospital presided over by Carolina Gilpin and staffed by Dr. Clyde Arington, life hung in precarious balance.

The doctor had done what he could. With Carolina Gilpin in sympathetic, efficient attendance, he had worked tirelessly, with deft and automatic thoroughness, trying to save the life of the girl he loved.

Now there was nothing more to do and he sat by her side and waited.

THE waiting was the hardest of all. Memories of that other occasion when a gun-shot patient in this same room, on this same bunk, had died under his hand, arose to flay him. Then as now, Carolina Gilpin had moved resolutely about. He remembered her brown capable hands against the stark whiteness of the bandages. Then as now, there had been the tense, silent faces watching from the shadows, the almost unbreathing faces. Some of them were the same faces. Jim Juniper, Charlie the Ute. . . .

Suddenly the doctor buried his head in his hands. Was that nightmare memory going to repeat itself to the last tragic detail? He felt Carolina Gilpin's warm and understanding touch on his bare arm. From somewhere behind him he could hear Frijole crying to himself.

Another memory kept lancing through his feverish brain: Myrna taking the bullet meant for him, thrusting her own soft body between him and the blasting drive of gun lead! He had so glibly analyzed her: "no staying power, no fighting heart."

And now— She lay dying because she had thrown herself with complete unselfishness into the fight for Sweetgrass Basin justice . . . and for him!

He felt Carolina Gilpin's touch grow suddenly firmer on his arm. He looked up—into Myrna's waking hazel eyes! His breath drew in. He bent close. Her face was so white. Her lips white too. They trembled, as though under tension, gathering strength. Then they bent in a smile, a faint wan smile, and spoke faint words.

The doctor leaned closer, so close that he felt her coppery red hair against his cheek.

"Do you still think—I wouldn't have made—a good wife—doctor?"

He pressed his cheek against hers as firmly as he dared, and held it there.

"You're going to make a wonderful wife," he said huskily.

"Oh, my dear," she breathed. Then: "Look at me."

He lifted his head. "I love you, Myrna."

"I love you," she said.

Myrna's eyelids flickered. She weakly sighed, smiled again more faintly than before. "I feel better now," she said.

There was a supreme patience, a final resignation in her voice. It gave the doctor a chill that wracked him to the core. Because her attitude was one he recognized. He had encountered it before among patients tremoring on the threshold of eternity. It appeared to be a valiant reaching out for love, for life. But it wasn't. It was an acceptance of death!

As though his own great need for her could pull her back, he said, "We'll be happy! You'll get well—it won't be long. You'll make a wonderful wife. And I—I'll try to be all you want me to be. I love you, Myrna. From the first I've loved you. . . ."

She listened to him and smiled with gentle tolerance, with that same apparent acceptance of the future which the doctor knew was only an acceptance of death. The doctor looked hopelessly up at Carolina Gilpin, and he saw that she knew too.

He felt so helpless. Here was something medical skill and science could not touch. Everything had been done that could be done. The gun-shot wound did not have to be fatal. Though she was weak from loss of blood and from shock, she could still fight her way back to solid earth—if she wanted to.

She could live—if she willed to live!

That was the catch. She had no will to live. Why? She loved him, she said. She knew now that he loved her . . . or did she? Hadn't she believed him when he said he loved her? Had she thought he said it merely to comfort her?

"Myrna," he pled, and there was no denying it now, fear was large in his eyes. "You've saved my life. Won't you let me save yours? I'll have to save it to make my own worth living. But you'll have to help me. You'll have to help me by *wanting* me to save it—"

"But my dear," she breathed, "I don't want you to save it."

For a moment he thought he would go mad. The walls of the hot little room swung around. "Why don't you want me to save it, Myrna?" he choked. "Why?"

"But you've just said why! Without me, dearest, you said your own life wouldn't be worth living. I—I feel that way too. Without you—you see, I know about you, why you came to Sweetgrass Basin. Barney told me.

"You have to die. You've been so brave, trying to keep it from me. But I know, you see. So now, please stop feeling sorry for me. I love you. I'm happy now with you. And I don't care, really, if I die—with you."

SO NOW he knew! His drunken mouthings—the Ides of March—came back to cruelly haunt him. That fatal calendar sheet with the days checked off one by one—

"You're crying," she said. "Don't cry." She reached a trembling hand to his wet stubble of his cheek. His shoulders shook.

"Myrna," he choked, "if you thought I would live, would you—try to live too. Because if you tried, you could!"

"Of course," she told him, with that same ineffable gentleness, as though to a child.

He lifted his tear-streaked face to her, and with new vitality, said, "Then live, Myrna! Live! Because I'm going to! . . ."

And then he told her. He had come West to die. Yes. He had at the most a month to live. But he had lived that month. He had crossed off the days on the calendar and thrown the sheet away. He had lived and he would keep on living! The fact that he had lived out his month and was still going strong was indisputable proof of a mistaken diagnosis.

He mumbled a jumble of medical terms, something about leukomia and glandular fever, both with symptoms of low-grade fever, and other surface similarities. But with leukemia fatal in a month, and glandular fever a picayunish thing, a positive nothing, by comparison. And all that had been the matter with him had been this picayunish thing, this nothing. And even that was under control now, what with the hearty food, good western air, and the exercise he had been getting. He never felt so well in his life . . . and no man ever loved a girl as much as he loved Myrna. . . .

She sighed, and blinked, and cried softly, and made little murmuring sounds. "Yes,"

she said, "I'll live! I—I seem to feel better already!"

Frijole crept close and knelt with the doctor by her side. He stole a look at the doctor, and his own face turned radiant because the doctor's was. His grimy little hand reached up to the doctor's black string tie.

"It's crooked," he whispered. "I better straighten it for the lady."

The doctor smiled at him. "You like the lady too, Frijole?"

"Next to you, I like her best of anybody!"

Myrna smiled at them both. "Clyde," she said, the name sounding curiously exciting on her lips, "don't you think we'd—better adopt Frijole?"

The doctor looked at the boy. "Pard, consider yourself adopted." At Frijole's uncomprehending stare, the doctor pulled him close and said, "It isn't as bad as it sounds, fella."

There were others crowding close now. A quickening had gone about the room. Everyone started talking at once, and they all seemed as happy for Myrna and the doctor, as the pair were for themselves.

A little later while Myrna slept easily and Carolina Gilpin hovered near, the doctor took Lige Carson to one side. He had to say something and he didn't know just how to go about it.

"I'm sorry," he started. "About Myrna, I mean."

"What about her? She's going to be all right, isn't she?"

"Yes . . . I mean about you and Myrna."

"I still don't get it."

"I mean," the doctor said desperately, "I'm sorry we both can't have her—"

Lige dropped his hand to the doctor's shoulder. "Is that what you've thought all this time?" Chuckling, he called to Carolina Gilpin, and when she came to his side, he slipped his arm familiarly around her. "Don't you remember I told you she was staked out, Doc? She is—to me. What do you say, Doc—do we make it a double wedding?"

The doctor blinked, and, "Check, partner!" he said.

"Only thing is—" Lige smiled wryly—"Carolina and I'll have to start all over again, build from the bottom—I've lost my ranch. I went in over my neck to finance that barb wire train. The cars are still on the siding at Deep Wells. But with my ranchhouse burned out and my cattle scattered, I'll never be able to meet the notes. Bank'll take over the *Tres Pinos.*"

It was the doctor's turn to chuckle. "Now I've got something to tell you! You can pay off those loans and have more left than you ever had in your life. Listen." He told Lige about the time three years ago when Lige's father visited De Kalb and put in his order for the first carload of barbed wire.

"Yes, I know," Lige interrupted. "Barney told me all about it."

"Not *all* about it," the doctor insisted. "There was one thing even Barney didn't know. Barney was in the osage orange business at the time, and as your father expressed it, uncommon sensitive about hedge. So your father didn't let Barney know when he invested money with me in the barbed wire business! That's what first set me to putting two and two together about your father's murder, Lige. I knew he hadn't been killed for his money, because he didn't have any with him. What he hadn't spent for the carload of fencing, he'd invested in the business. He disappeared right after leaving De Kalb, and since there weren't any profits in the business for a while, no strenuous efforts were made to trace him. But the skimp days are over. Barbed wire is being turned out by the mile now, and your profits are piling up. You're a rich man, Lige!"

LIGE looked at Carolina and they both laughed, a little breathlessly. "Doc," Lige said, "did you feather your nest too? Because if you didn't—"

"I was a ground-floor investor too," the doctor said. "Between the two of us, we'll make this basin bloom."

"Doc, you mean you're figurin' on settlin' with us? I was afraid you'd be takin' Myrna and hikin' back East."

"I know when I'm well off," the doctor said. "This is my country. It's brought me life and everything that makes life worth living. Here I stay."

"Spoken like a true son of the frontier, Doc. With you neighborin' me, that'll make the set-up about perfect. . . . Or do you aim to locate in Gunsight, maybe? I'm forgettin'; you're a medico, not a rancher."

"Myrna would want to keep the ranch, I know," the doctor said. "And here's what I've been thinking. With her father gone, she'll need somebody to run it for her. How about Jim Juniper for the job? They seem

to have a lot of respect for each other—"

"It'll work like a clock!" Lige said, with enthusiasm. "It's a job Jim could handle. And maybe he could even get Charlie the Ute to lend a hand. The kind of law we're goin' to have in Sweetgrass Basin from now on, men like them won't have to be fugitives from. I've been worryin' about them. They saved my neck by cuttin' me in on Devil's Pasture. But now the secret of Devil's Pasture is out. It can never be an owlhooter's hide-out any more—"

"Do you know what it could be?"

"What?"

"I've had a dream about it from the first minute I set eyes on the place." There was an undercurrent of excitement in the doctor's voice. "I feel in a left-handed way I owe my life to this desert paradise. Lige, this place could bring life to thousands of people from all over the world! People now utterly without hope—"

"You mean the desert sun, the healthy climate and all?"

"Exactly. The high dry air, the healing sun against this background of unbelievably soul-relaxing beauty. It will make men sound in body, mind, and spirit. I want to build a sanatorium here. I want to outfit it with every facility known to medical science and surgical science. I want to staff it with men who are the best in their fields. I want it to operate at cost. The West can give the East more than beefsteak, Lige. It can give it life! It can give the whole world life.

"Just as it's always served the owlhooters without respect to color, age, or creed, I want it to be a mecca now for the sick and hopeless ones from all the world."

Lige's gaze had drifted away as the doctor talked. The doctor couldn't hide his anxiety when he asked, "What do you think of the idea?"

"I was just considerin'," Lige said. "Now that the avalanche has come down the mountain, it's stabilized that slide-rock slope and at the same time built up a roadbed. A stage line could be constructed from the railroad with very little trouble—and safe." He smiled somberly. "Even our avalanche, which was supposed to have brought only death, is workin' out to the benefit of mankind, Doc. What do I think of the idea? I think it's great! . . . Only thing is, we're goin' to need a high-pressure promoter to put it across. I can see it growin' bigger'n our combined barb wire profits. We need somebody to get out and sell this idea to a lot of humanitarian-minded people—"

"What's the matter with me?" a burry voice broke in from behind them. "Barb-wire Barney—at your service, gents. Couldn't help overhearin' about your pretty plan. Sounds like the rollin' tide of progress to me."

They all turned, laughing. "How would the barb wire business get along without you, Barney?" the doctor asked.

Barb-wire Barney puffed smoke, and talked around both side of his stogy. "Barbed wire business is like the West—plumb growed up. It don't need a man of my persuasive talents any more. From now on barb wire will sell itself. So how about cuttin' in Health-house Harry on your new chunk of destiny? I'll guarantee to get a sanatorium built in Devil's Pasture that's marble-tight, castle-high, and steel-strong. I'll build one so big that just the red roof tiles laid on edge will reach from here to Cheyenne. Hey, look, I'll even plant you a osage-orange hedge around it—"

"Barney, you're hired!" the doctor said.

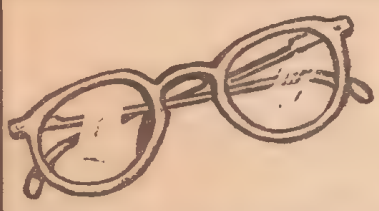
"I wonder what I'll do after that," Barney mused. "Life is a interesting thing to live, ain't it?"

"It is!" the doctor affirmed. He raked his fingers through his unruly crow-black hair. He had added twenty pounds to his spare frame since coming west. His face had filled out, and it was bronzed from rangeland wind and sun. If the look in Carolina Gilpin's eyes meant anything, he was now someone to command admiring attention. "I'm going to have 'a big trouble' with this hair of mine," he said. "Haven't put a comb through it in a month. If you'll excuse me, I guess I'll go slick up a bit. I got a woman to care how I look now!"

THE END

Curioddities By Weill

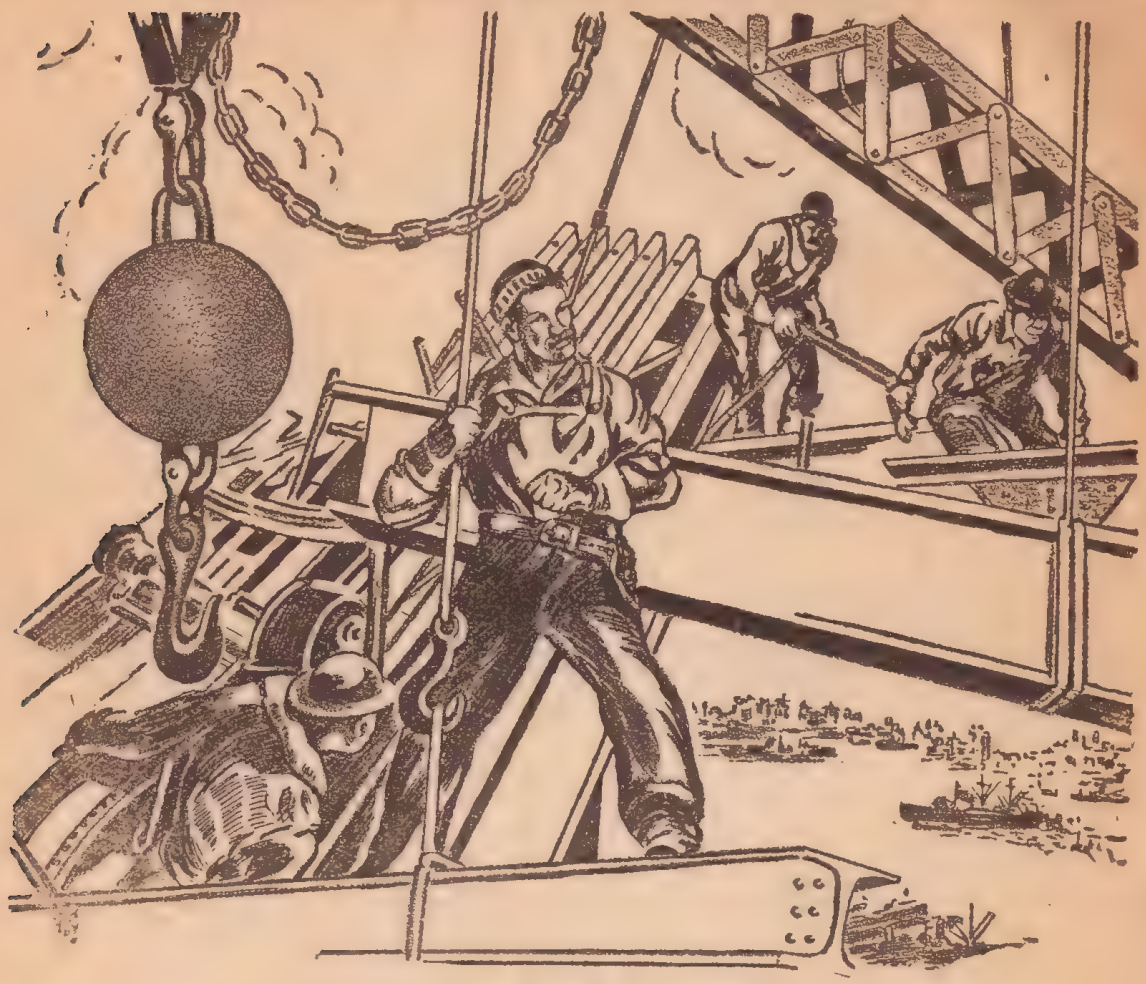
ALL CIRCUS ELEPHANTS COME FROM INDIA BECAUSE THE AFRICAN VARIETY IS INCORRIGIBLE AND EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO TRAIN! THE BELIEF THAT ELEPHANTS HAVE A COMMON DYING GROUND IS UNTRUE, THEY DIE LIKE ANY OTHER ANIMAL. MANY OF THEM IN PAIN RUSH OUT INTO THE JUNGLE TO BE SEEN NO MORE, *BUT MOST OF THEM DIE AS UNROMANTICALLY AS HORSES!*



AT ONE TIME SPECTACLES WERE MADE OF QUARTZ AND SOME YEARS AGO THESE QUARTZ LENZES WERE REVIVED AND SOLD BY THE OPTICIANS ON THE ERRONEOUS PLEA *THAT THEY WERE COOLER TO THE EYES!*

THE TORPEDO'S POWER IN THE WATER IS EQUAL TO THAT OF A MODERN V-8 AUTOMOBILE ENGINE! WEIGHING 1500 POUNDS IT WILL RUN A DISTANCE OF 3,000 YARDS AT 40 MILES PER HOUR BEFORE IT STOPS DUE TO FUEL SHORTAGE, AND THE COST OF ONE IS ABOUT $10,000

" . . . Always Hit the High Spots, Kid. Live Like a Flame!"



THE BOOMER

By FRANCIS GOTT

Author of "Gull on the Beam," etc.

MY UNCLE'S beefy face, in anger, was even more fiery than usual. His blue eyes smoked hot, intensifying the lurid copper of his hair, as he sought my gaze.

"Ye were out with Shanghai Kelly-ag'in last night," he accused.

"I was that," I said.

"Kelly's no good," my uncle said. His immense shoulders heaved under his mackinaw; he spat in a palm, knotted a fist.

"I thought you said he was a good rigger?"

"Sure—first class. But his tongue would scorch the wings of the angels and the devil himself would burn himself out chasing him through the corridors of hell."

At sixteen, unlike most boys of my age, I carry two hampering burdens—one being that I am my uncle's ward and the other that I am his spitting image. Of course, I am not knobbed out in queer places with flesh like my uncle, but the promise is there; for I carry the same squat frame, broad and deep, riding on the same bow legs.

I am fortunate, I know, and God is good; yet my uncle irks me terribly at times. I am man grown and he treats me like a child.

He laid a hand on my shoulder and I was surprised and uncomfortable to see that his eyes were blurred with mist.

"Because I'm wantin' ye to grow up to be a good man, O'Bannon," he said, clearing the husk from his throat. "Kelly's bad clear through—a drinker, a gambler, a woman chaser, he lives only for himself."

"I like Kelly," I said.

The rigging loft was cluttered with gear so that a man could hardly move without bumping into blocks and tackle, shackles all sizes up to sixty pounds, turnbuckles from ones no bigger'n my little finger up to giants weighing two hundred and fifty pounds, stays and shrouds and anchor chain—

Each week we send a new ship to sea which takes a lot of rigging. Manila, hemp and wire splicing. Measurements. Anchor boom and winch tests. Tugging and hauling ships from dock to dock by means of chain falls and double lufts on blocks and tackle.

Masts to be stepped and hauled and heaved into place, plumb true. Guns, boilers, condensers, and machinery and pipe to be put aboard. Signals to be learned for a man can't shout loud enough to be heard above the terrific din of riveting hammers and air guns biting off steel chips.

Shanghai Kelly knows all this work and is teaching it to me. The yard has won the coveted Army-Navy "E" award and intends to hold it.

"Speakin' o' the devil—" my uncle growled.

I heard a soft step to my right and turned to see Kelly appear from behind three huge drums of wire rope. He looked straight at my uncle, his black eyes glinting with laughter.

"If you think so ill of me, Captain Zadoc Quill, then why'd you turn O'Bannon here over to me as my helper?"

"Because they ain't a better rigger here in the loft," my uncle told him. "I want the b'y to learn the trade and learn it right. But I aint wantin' him to follow ye into the gutter nights and become mired in your wickedness and sin."

Kelly passed a long fingered hand before his face and wiped his laughter away. His eyes were hard and full and frightening and the beaded moisture on his broad forehead and at the roots of his curly black hair seemed to have frozen there, so cold was he.

"If you had not already told me such things to my face," he said, his voice clear and ringing like a bell, "I'd tear you apart, Cap'n Quill!"

Kelly tapped my arm. "Come on, kid. We got the 'A' frame to rig."

As I followed Kelly to the door that led down a flight of stairs to the yard level, I turned to look back at my uncle. He was morose and glowering and I felt sorry for him. His eyes had gone back on him and he'd had to leave the sea. The best he could do ashore was as rigging foreman in the shipyard. He liked neither the work nor the men nor the low salary; yet he tried to make the best of it. Now that he could not take me to sea with him as had been his ambition, he took me into the shipyard with him where he could keep his thumb on me.

I WONDERED why he disliked Kelly so. Kelly had got out of China ahead of the Japs; there was some obscure tie between him and my uncle and I wondered what it was. Kelly had come to him with a letter one gusty night several years before. I had looked up from my high school books, surprised to see that my uncle's hand had trembled as he read it.

My mind turned back to that night as Kelly led me past a string of flat cars loaded with propellers, giant shafts, gun mounts, down between the machine shop and the welding flat to Number "14" ways. The "A" frame towered above us, steel struts gaunt against the winter sky.

"What's eatin' your uncle, kid?" he asked me, shifting the sagging gear belt on his hips so that his marlin spike, wire nippers and roping knife hung free for climbing.

"I dunno," I said, not wanting to say too much against my uncle.

"He'd better lay off," Kelly rasped, mobile lips twisted. "I ain't done 'im any harm. If he keeps it up—"

Kelly was lithe, lean, dark and powerful, flashing fire like metal under an Arctic sun. Always ready with a quip, yet he seldom let one catch the thought stream of his inner self.

Like my uncle, I am discovering that I am not one to keep black thoughts hidden.

Therefore, I prompted, "And you'll do what, Shanghai?"

"I'll get to rollin'—an' hit another shipyard. Always hit the high spots, kid. Live like a flame."

On sudden impulse I cried, pulses beating wildly. "And I'll go with you, Shanghai!"

Kelly gave me a queer look; the man knew such would be my answer! Yet I didn't care. "I like you, kid. We could have a lot of fun together. South America! Alaska! Russia! After the war things'll be booming, kid. And back to China to see the old man. Them old Chinks never die. My old man's a Chinaman, kid; not that I got Chinese blood, but the old duffer raised me and a whiter man there never was."

Kelly's hard face was glowing. He laid a hand on my shoulder. It was then that the wire fell.

A ten foot end of seven eighths inch runner. It trailed down from the "A" frame and, black against the snow, dragged past Kelly's felt boots. Kelly jumped. His lips drew back in a snarl and his wind-seared face drained of color.

"Damn you, up there!" he shouted, looking aloft. "Do that again, an' I'll tear yuh apart. Riggers? Hag'g!"

Kelly spat. The half dozen men working aloft were quiet; they had no liking to tangle with Kelly. All hands conceded that the man was a devil; yet, even then, the feeling was strong within me that Kelly was greater than any of us.

"You sure can move quick when yuh hafta, Shanghai," I laughed.

I caught him off guard.

"I'm scared of it," he told me in a confidential undertone.

"Of what?" I asked, puzzled.

"Wire!" he whispered, licking dry lips.

"Why?"

KELLY hesitated and I glimpsed the awful loneliness welling up in the man. "Keep it to yourself, O'Bannon, but you remember that rigger who was killed by a wire cable during a launching here just before you came in. You remember the men talking about it. Well, I could've saved him; I see that now, but at that time I didn't have the experience I have now. But maybe that's just an excuse. Anyway, only me and your uncle know that if I had jumped in and taken a quick turn with that wire that the bight would not have hauled that poor chap through the taffrail, killing him, for he was all tangled up in the slack behind me. But that wire—it got away from me! I was scared of it! God—"

"That might have happened to anyone, Shanghai."

He shuddered. "Your uncle blamed me, said it was the rotten core in my ancestry. Lord, he hurt me. When I first came I had looked for friendship, at least. But Cap'n Quill was cold, did what he could for me—as if he begrudged it. Then he began to soften a bit. We were even friendly and I knew that he was mellowing to the point where he'd tell me who my father and mother were. Then that accident—"

I could think of nothing to say.

We climbed the "A" frame to its top where we helped hang several five ton chain falls. One hundred feet below us, the yard heaved and belched. Ships were being pounded into shape under the driving surge of air guns. Chippers and riveters wrestled with air hoses, dribbled alcohol into them to keep them from freezing, and swore. Welding smoke curled into the cold air, and, even away up here, high as I was, the fumes plagued my lungs. From the hulls on the ways, tacking arcs broke and rained orange sparks; despite the hurt to my eyes, I had to watch them flowering here, there, everywhere.

Hundreds of workers, representing forty different trades, surged in files like ants. They passed on and off the boats, by gangways and ramps, and into shops and out, up and down ladders and stagings, and into noisome tunnels, lapped by tidewater, under the ways. Fifteen thousand iron workers, riding the boom. The greatest boom that America had ever known, a boom riding on a river of blood.

By the time we had the "A" frame rigged, tackles and falls and other gear hung, and a trestle erected athwartships across the bowels of a destroyer, the four o'clock whistle had blown.

"Tomorrow we'll hoist the big boiler and

put it aboard," Kelly said, as we dropped down to the yard level. "Meet me at Duffy's poolroom, kid, at seven."

He grinned, comradeship lighting his black eyes. Before I could answer, the mob had surged about him and had swirled him away toward the time clocks.

Now I had not intended going out with Kelly that night. After all, I had due respect for my uncle and I wanted to give him time to cool off. However, I had made him no promise; neither had I told Kelly I'd meet him at the poolroom. Still, Kelly took it so for granted—

So—there I was, at the appointed time in Duffy's poolroom. My copper hair was slicked back, and a new blue serge suit bulged over my knobbiness. Ready and waiting, I was. Knowing that I was Kelly's helper, the iron workers chalking their cues around the pool tables, didn't wax too wise at my sixteen years.

A couple of minutes later the room crackled when Kelly entered. Life burned strong in that man. He was a human magnet. Bareheaded, affable, hard and wind seared, he turned to me.

"All set, kid?" he asked.

"All set, Shanghai," I said.

"Ever play billiards, O'Bannon?"

"No."

Kelly grinned. "Your education has been sadly neglected."

Kelly knew all the answers. From Duffy's place we made the rounds. I was proud to be with him, surprised and pleased that even the service men reacted to his moods.

"Only hit the high spots, O'Bannon," he advised. "Wine, women, song, cards—only the best, and not too much of any one of 'em."

Well, 'twas nigh time to go back to work when I got back home to my uncle's. The old bachelor was up, glowering and bristling and pacing the kitchen floor as if he was standing a bridge watch.

"So!" he rumbled.

"You hadn't ought to wait up like this Uncle Zadoc," I said, grinning, free and easy.

His ruddy jowls trembled. He nipped my arm with splayed thumb and finger. "Cal'ate ye're all right, b'y. An' ye ain't been drinkin', I see. If 'twas anybody else 'cept Kelly—"

"Next time let's make it a threesome," I suggested.

"Arrugh'h!" he spat.

My uncle was angry, though. Sure enough, when we climbed into the rigging loft and the place wrapped its tarry smells about us, he lit into Kelly.

"Why, ye, ye—" he stopped. Veins stood out on his forehead as he sought for harsher words. Finally he let forth a raucous blast. "Boomer! Riff-raff!"

To my uncle, knowing him as I did, the words meant all that was worst in human nature.

"That'll do, old man!" Kelly rasped, and he meant it. He was as cold as a tomb. "I'd rather be called worse names by some than a boomer by you. I'll be on the 'A' frame if you want to apologize. I'll give you till noon to think it over. O'Bannon here will never come to any harm through me. Savvy?"

"Get out of my sight!" my uncle choked. He was breathing hard.

Kelly strapped on his gear belt. His ebony hair seemed to curl and crackle as he left the loft.

"O'Bannon," my uncle said, "I don't want to see ye become like the likes o' him. Bad, clear through. Cold, hard, selfish—"

How could I, a boy, see what my uncle couldn't see? It disturbed me. After all, was I wrong about Kelly? Was there no good in him at all? I stumbled out of the loft.

WHEN I reached Number "14" ways I found that a crane car was warping a monster boiler, on rollers, under the "A" frame. Oily black wire was purring through sheaves. Fascinated, alive and tingling to the work, I watched.

"Stand clear!" Kelly shouted down at me.

So I climbed the "A" frame to its top where Kelly sat on a steel beam, smoking a cigarette, eyes narrowed.

"Yuh gotta watch wire," Kelly muttered. "All the time."

"I'm not afraid of it," I said.

"I am," he said.

"How much does that boiler weigh?"

He shrugged. "Thirty ton."

"'Twouldn't do to let it fall on your toe, eh, Shanghai! 'Twould clip toenails for sure."

"Yeah."

I balanced myself on a strongback, jerked at my sagging gear belt like Kelly did, and looked out over the river toward the city. A tug, belching smoke, was breasting ice and tooting. A heavily laden freighter, beyond, in the channel, was nosing downstream. I felt man grown and hunger ate at me.

Kelly tossed his cigarette at the nose of a swinging crane, sweeping over our heads, with a load of armor plate.

"If your uncle don't show up to apologize by noon," he said, "we'll draw our time. I know a ship that's pulling out tonight for the Far East. She needs two A. B.'s. No sheriff will ever catch you, kid."

"All right," I said.

I was wild to go to sea, to know far places. Selfish, aye; but if a boy feels it, he feels it. A tearing hunger, burning away all reason. I thought little, then, of the hurt that I might do my uncle.

I knew that my uncle would not apologize to Kelly. Noon came, and passed, and he did not.

"That's that, kid," Kelly said, accent clipped, foreign. "After we get this boiler into hull 301—"

Kelly looked down and I followed his glance. Fifty feet below us my uncle had stopped under the "A" frame.

"Here's the old duffer now," said Kelly uneasily.

"Ahoy! Aloft!" my uncle shouted. "O'Bannon, ye come down, an' ye, too, Kelly! I want to talk to the both of ye."

His deep voice was ugly, and tinged with despair as if some old hurt were getting him down.

"We got work to do," objected Kelly.

"Never mind the wu'k," my uncle shouted. "I want to talk to ye two—alone."

Kelly tugged at his collar. He looked hot and worried; plainly his uneasiness was increasing.

"The old duffer's got something on me," he muttered. Then he shouted, combatively, "It's private enough up here. If you want to talk, old man—"

Kelly was stalling. To our surprise, my uncle started climbing. He climbed slowly, his mackinaw hampering him somewhat and the wind tugging at the black tie-strings that held up the sheepskin lined ear lappers of his cap.

He reached the beam on which we balanced and stood there, swaying, apparently unmindful of the drop beneath him. He looked steadily at Kelly, his homely face working, and pain lay in his eyes.

"Robert," he said, an ugly burr mixed with madness giving weight to his words, "are ye going to leave O'Bannon alone?"

Robert! I had never heard my uncle use Kelly's given name before. My interest heightened, for I saw that my uncle was being swept along by one of his old moods when pictures from the past took possession of him. Kelly, too, was startled, a little over-awed and bewildered; an unwilling acknowledgment of my uncle's strange behavior giving him pause as if at the threshold of a door that he had long dreaded to open. Then his foolish pride got the best of him and he shook his gloved fist in my uncle's face.

"What I do on my own time is my own business, you old fool," he rasped.

"Ye don't know what ye're sayin', my b'y," my uncle admonished, like a priest.

Kelly laid a hand on my uncle's shoulder, the knotted fist of his right hand drawn back.

"Be careful!" I warned.

They swayed there. My heart was thumping, for I feared one would take the other over, neither caring.

"Ye would strike your own uncle, Robert!" my uncle cried.

Kelly's fist stopped, frozen. We were both stunned. Whisperings that I had heard as a child began to form into frightening pictures. As a young man my uncle had been cruelly dealt with by a man and two women —yet this was long ago.

What had these old scandals to do with me and Kelly?

"You!" Kelly faltered. He moistened his lips. "So that's it! So that is why old Soong sent me to you, and bade me treat you with respect."

"Aye."

"Well, out with it," Kelly bade, drearily. "Tell me I'm half Chinese."

"Ye're not," my uncle said, surprised. "Soong told ye nothing about your father and mother?"

"No," Kelly trembled.

My uncle's face contorted into a mask of hate, his eyes boiled like a storm wracked

sea. "Soong is a good man. But your father—"

"Out with it!"

"Arrugh'h!" my uncle spat.

WHILE the wind whispered through the open steel work of the "A" frame and strummed through taut wires, my uncle carried us back thirty years to the time he was master of a ship running to the Far East.

"Where does O'Bannon enter into all this?" Kelly asked.

"He don't," my uncle declared fervently. "But as for yourself—Soong had more love and time and money for you than I would ever have."

"Yet he was nothing to me."

"In blood—no. However, Soong had one child, a pretty girl. Your father was Thurlow Kelly, a young banker, in partnership with Soong. Then, one trip, I had my sister and her friend with me, a girl I was going to marry."

My uncle paused, swallowed, looked out over the river. The ancient whispers began to click into place in my head, forming pictures. All this had nothing to do with me or my own father, who had been drowned at sea.

My uncle passed a mittened hand over his eyes. "Well, your father came aboard to look after some ship's business. He met my sister and the other girl. I was a plodder, a little stupid. Kelly ran off with my sister. The girl I was going to marry, followed, was going to try to talk them out of it. She got caught in the web herself. Kelly divorced Soong's daughter, married my sister and you were born. Well, your mother died, soon after, and Kelly married the girl I was going to marry and they both got killed in an accident. Old Soong's was the only decent hand in the whole mess; he took ye and brought ye up. And it's bad rubbish ye've turned out to be, Robert Kelly, like your father."

Kelly's face twisted in a fleeting grimace. "'Twas cruel, though—not knowing. And the whispers—"

My uncle flinched.

"You've got a lot to answer for, old man."

My uncle's face hardened. "I did the best I could for ye."

Kelly pointed at me. "Yet you raised O'Bannon like he was your own son."

"'Bannon's father was me twin brother, a good man. Your father—"

Kelly's face drained of color; he was taking it hard.

"Well, Robert, don't ye drag O'Bannon into a mess," my uncle warned. He looked sick, yet relieved as if he had brought up something bad from his stomach. He descended the "A" frame, moved away slowly toward the loft.

KELLY and I dropped to the ground, also. We stood there talking. All at once, Kelly stopped, head canted. I heard a thin whine coming from the straining falls to which we had the boiler hung. We forgot about our plans for getting away to sea.

We had worked the boiler within the "A" frame and had lifted it ten feet off the ground. It was held, temporarily, by one heavy falls only, made up of two six sheave blocks and two thousand feet of wire runner. The upper block was fastened to the top of the "A" frame and the lower was hooked into a stout strap of inch and a half diameter wire bellied around the boiler. The hauling part of the falls led down from the upper block to a snatch block hooked beside the "A" frame and from there across to the drum of a powerful winch.

"She's going to part!" Kelly said, in a clacking whisper as if all moisture had been sucked from his throat and mouth. He pointed at the hauling part, at a place three feet from the slowly revolving drum, then at the winchman. "Stop that winch!"

The fat rigger at the winch pulled on the control lever. The overworked wire continued to complain, however; it was much used stuff which we had to make the best of, for we couldn't get new wire for two weeks yet.

"Aloft, there!" Kelly yelled. "Whip that chain stopper about the hauling part!"

Kelly started aloft.

"Hurry!" the winchman begged, fat cheeks sagging.

In fascination I stared at the bruise in the wire. It was working as if a mouse was within it, gnawing.

Then Kelly stopped, halfway up the "A" frame. "Dammit!" he cried at the man above him. "You've got the wrong stopper! That one's too light."

Kelly looked down at me. "Where's that heavy chain stopper?"

I looked about me. I saw it coiled under the boiler! I looked up at Kelly. He was climbing again, lifting himself up fast, toward the man who was clutching the turns he had made with the light stopper.

Disregarding the winchman's warning cry, I ducked under the boiler. I scooped up the heavy chain and turned to dart outside the "A" frame. My foot sank into a heap of scrap metal, frozen in the ice. I couldn't move! I wrenched desperately.

It was then that I became fully conscious of the tremendous weight swaying above me.

Thirty ton!

My eyes stabbed toward the winch drum. I saw the hauling part of the falls fuzz out —and part. With a thin whine that wire lashed upward, out of my sight. The boiler shuddered to a two inch drop. The light chain stopper, alone, held it. Yet for how long? How must a cockroach feel under the raised heel of a man?

The winchman screamed up at Kelly, "Young Quill's under the load wid his foot caught!"

"Lord! Kid O'Bannon?" Kelly's voice reached me, thinned by height.

On the cold air my anxious ears caught the sharp cracking sound of a snapped link. The weak stopper had parted! The boiler shuddered, dropped. Wire purred through sheaves.

Then the boiler stopped. It had dropped no more than a few inches.

The winchman ducked under the "A" frame. He kicked fiercely at my foot, freed it, almost threw me out from under that boiler in desperation.

Clear of the "A" frame, we looked up. I choked out a cry—and my fingernails bit into my palms within my mittens. A man hung in midair, close hauled up under the upper block. Shanghai Kelly!

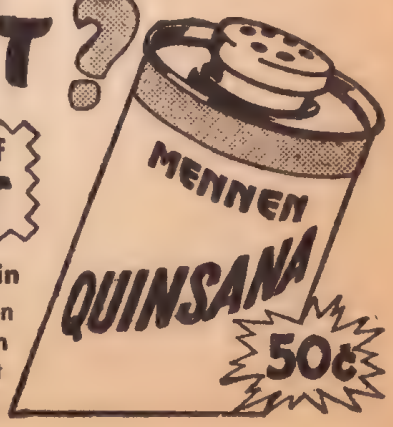
I saw that—having nothing to use as an anchorage from where he stood, and faced by seconds only—he had coiled the hauling part of the falls around and around his hips. When the weak stopper snapped in two, he had been yanked up against the big block, ground into the sheaves. A human stopper! A human toggle!

Sure, we hung the boiler to chain falls, and got him down—alive.

We have a new hospital within the yard. When those yawning doors of that butcher shop closed behind Kelly, I went all hollow inside.

The docs say he'll walk, but never without a limp, and on crooked legs.

My uncle? Heck! He can't do enough for Shanghai Kelly. They play cribbage together every night.

HAVE YOU GOT IT?
Check Yourself for Symptoms of
ATHLETE'S FOOT
☐ Cracks, peeling between toes ☐ Itching ☐ Soggy skin
New scientific 2-way treatment with QUINSANA powder—on feet and in shoes—is producing amazing results. In tests on thousands of persons, practically all cases of Athlete's Foot cleared up quickly with Quinsana—used today by millions.


A Very Violent Case of Cabin Fever

WILDERNESS WILES

By GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

Author of "White Gold," etc.

THEY had been partners for more than a dozen years when, a few months ago, they split up. A winter that was unusually long and hard even for Alaska had kept them confined indoors too long and brought on an acute case of "cabin sickness." They quarreled beyond hope of mending. Old Jess Bailey had a nervous tic that kept his eyes winking; and Toby Gaynor, some five years older than Jess, had a chronic asthma that kept him wheezing. Jess's infirmity grew on Toby until he couldn't stand sight of it—and Toby's snoring breath made Jess want to grab an axe and run berserk. They were that sick of each other; that starved for change.

So they split up. That is, stocky Jess built himself a cabin a half mile away, on the far side of Moraine Creek. Scrupulously they divided their furniture and their grub. Their placer mine they could not divide; and as each needed his share of the modest stake of gold dust it yielded, they kept working together. They hardly talked. Each knew the other so well that they coordinated their toil as instinctively as two muscles in the same arm. Months passed. But time,

instead of mending their quarrel, worsened it in various ways.

First, the war came—and gold mining was ordered stopped by Washington. Lanky old Toby, who was a law-abiding sort, suggested that they quit mining.

"They're building a big air field down at Anchorage. Let's go down there and get jobs."

"Hell, no!" Jess grunted sourly. "You go, if you want. Me, I'm stayin'. This placer is gettin' richer."

Tall old Toby uncertainly rubbed his white-whiskered chin. It was true that the placer dust was getting richer. They might stumble onto a "pocket" any time now that would yield a fortune in dust and nuggets. They might eventually trace the gold back to the lode from which it had been washed. Naturally he couldn't go away and leave any rich new pickings for mean old Jess to grab.

"Guess I'll stay," he said curtly.

And Jess bit his lip in disappointment—

—for already he, Jess, had uncovered a "pot hole" in the bed of the ancient creek they were working that held possibly a hundred thousand dollars worth of the precious gold.

I can't keep it hidden much longer, he realized. *That damned Toby has got sharp eyes. Maybe I should tell him? . . . Like hell I will! I ain't goin' to share it with him!*

And Jess, whose hair was still surprisingly thick and dark for a man of his age, suffered agonies of suspense whenever he hiked down out of their claim in the foothills of the Chugach Range to buy supplies in the town of Palmer. Would old Toby discover that rich "pocket" in the creek bed while he was gone? And loot it! . . . Always Jess breathed with relief, on his return, to find tall old Toby still at work.

Jess made these trips down for supplies because old Toby lacked the hardihood to keep trading with gold dust since mining it was taboo. Jess had the gall and effrontery to get away with it, though. In Palmer, the storekeeper asked Jess where he'd got placer dust, and didn't he know mining it was forbidden? Jess would look him right in the eye and scowl as he said that the dust was some he had left over from before the gold-closing order. The storekeeper knew better, and Deputy U. S. Marshall McInerney knew better. But old Jess and Toby had to eat, so what the hell—

"You and Toby mended your quarrel yet?" McInerney asked Jess once.

"Naw. And listen, Marshal," Jess grated. "If you ever come up to our claim and find me dead, it'll be Toby done it! I saw him smearing wolf poison onto some venison I hung up. I throwed the meat away and a couple of dogs that ate it died!"

McInerney frowned. He didn't believe the yarn. He did believe that the old-timers' hate had murder in it.

IT WAS on his way home from Palmer, that day, that brooding Jess had his big idea. It was when a bear lumbered out onto the trail ahead of him. Jess yelled and waved his arm—and the bear turned and vanished into the brush.

There were quite a few black bears, and brown ones of the same family, around their claim. They came down to eat the garbage. Never bothered anybody, and always turned away if you shooed them. There was one big old brown fellow, especially—

Jess's near-sighted eyes narrowed as he thought.

Next evening, when the big bear was pawing through the garbage which old Toby sensibly dumped far from his cabin. Jess was hidden in the brush on the far side of Moraine Creek. Jess had a .22 rifle. Taking careful aim, he put a small slug into the big bear's rump.

With a snarl the bear whirled and slapped at his hide, like a man who had been stung by a bee. Then he got busy eating again. Again Jess took aim, and squeezed trigger. Again the slug made the big beast snarl and whirl and paw his back with an angry, pained bewilderment so human that it made Jess chuckle.

"That you, shooting down-creek last night?" old Toby inquired of Jess, at work next morning.

"Any of your business if it was?" Jess retorted.

"Hell, no. Shoot yourself, for all I care."

Again the next night, and the next and the next, Jess hid in the brush near the garbage dump and stung the big bear with .22's. Jess began to wonder if he'd merely drive the big brute away before—Jess didn't quite put it into words even in his mind.

The big bear *did* seem shorter of temper now, the way he'd whirl and snap at the spot where the little slug had stung him; as if lead under his skin, if it wasn't infecting him and giving him a fever, was at least making him nasty of temper.

"No, sir, that bear don't like nobody, any more!"

And Jess was careful, gathering firewood or fetching water from the creek, that he did not encounter the big bear.

And then, one evening, the thing happened. Just what Jess had hoped—

OLD Toby must've gone out for a stroll and a smoke, down-creek. He walked around a clump of brush and met the bear face to face. Lanky, white-haired Toby had no chance at all. As usual, he yelled and waved. But the bear didn't shoo. The bear came right for him. Toby whirled, to run. But the next instant the big bear was upon him.

When Jess, later, saw what was lying upon the trail, Jess had to lean against a tree, he was so sick. He went to his cabin and got a tarpaulin and covered the body with it; then he walked unsteadily downtrail toward Palmer, and at the first farmhouse he left word for the marshal to come.

Deputy U. S. Marshal McInerney and a friend arrived on horseback, late the next day. They examined the body.

"That big bear sure mauled old Toby," the marshal said. "Did you see it happen, Jess?"

"No, I didn't!" Jess snapped.

The burly marshal rubbed his chin thoughtfully a moment, and sighed. "Guess we better take 'im on down into town."

The marshal and his helper had just started back downtrail with their loaded pack horse, when a big bear moved out of the brush onto the trail. The men reined up. The bear saw them—and stopped, nose twitching as he sought their scent.

"Go on, *git!*" McInerney yelled.

But instead of lumbering off into the brush, the bear rushed at them. McInerney spurred his mount aside; but Jim Geddy's horse, panicked, backed into the pack horse, and reared high, trumpeting in terror. The bear reached the saddler and struck, knocking the horse down as it tried to twist away. Jim Geddy was flung from saddle and hit the ground heavily. He scrambled up as the bear started for him, but sprawled headlong as his feet were snared by brush roots. The bear swerved after him.

But McInerney had been shooting; already he had put two .45 slugs into the bear, and the animal fell as a leg crumpled under him. McInerney kept shooting. The bear lunged onto his feet again, but a slug into his side, into his shoulder, and another back of the foreleg knocked him down. Vitally hit, the brown beast did not move again. But McInerney kept pulling trigger until his gun clicked, empty; for he knew that he and his assistant had been close to death.

Geddy walked shakily to the bear and stood looking at the big carcass.

"Usually they'll sidestep trouble. This one acted loco."

"He was sure bent on murder."

"Makin' a habit of it. This bear must've killed old Toby."

"Uh-huh. Say, you give me an idea."

McInerney patiently skinned the big bear.

And under the pelt, they found a half-dozen .22 caliber bullets.

For a long minute McInerney studied the pellets. The deputy marshal was slow and stolid, but he was no fool.

Geddy said, "Who in hell went bear-hunting with a twenty-two rifle, for God's sake!"

"Not bear-hunting. Man-hunting," said McInerney.

"What d'you mean?"

"I'm makin' a guess, but I think it's a good guess. These twenty-two slugs will fit a gun owned by old Jess Bailey. I bet the rifling marks would show they came out of Jess's gun."

"Don't think so, Mc. Hell, an old sourdough like Jess wouldn't risk having a bear break his neck by pestering it with twenty-two slugs!"

"Not *his* neck. Somebody else's."

Then Jim Geddy got it, and uttered a tuneless whistle. For a space they sat there on their heels, thinking.

Geddy summed it up: "We know Jess did murder. He made a killer out of this old bear. Riled 'im up until he was jumping every living thing that got in his way."

"Yeah."

"But how you going to prove Jess had intent to murder old Toby?"

"I can't. If Jess hasn't destroyed that

twenty-two rifle—he can still defend himself by saying that he was just shooting at the bear to drive it away from the garbage dump. And we can't prove different."

"Then he's going to get away with it!"

McInerney nodded. "I'm afraid so."

NEXT day Jess Bailey started cleaning out that rich "pocket" of placer dust in the creek bed. When he got all the riches out of that pot hole, he had more than a hundred thousand dollars in gold dust and nuggets.

"And it's all mine!"

He decided to leave Moraine Creek, then; and early one morning he started down-trail toward Palmer to hire a pack horse on which to carry out his belongings.

As he passed the garbage dump below old Toby's now deserted shack, he heard a heavy snuffing breath, and saw a bear step out into the trail. For an instant Jess's heart stood still in terror. Abruptly he laughed. The U. S. marshal and his helper had so obligingly shot and skinned the killer bear. He had nothing to fear from this big critter.

"Shoo, scat," he yelled, waving his arms.

But the bear did not dodge back into the brush. The bear charged, swiftly, with a lunge of power and rage.

Old Jess whirled, screaming. His scream died abruptly in the cool air, only a thin desperate echo lingering over the hiss and purl of the racing water of Moraine Creek.

The marshal and his friend Geddy brought old Jess out for burial, too. And slow, solid-thinking McInerney reasoned aloud to Jim Geddy.

"Just one way I can figure it. Old Jess's eyes weren't too sharp, you know. When he shot twenty-two slugs into that bear to rile 'im up, Jess made a mistake."

"How's that?"

"Don't you *see* it, man? Old Jess was his own judge, jury, and executioner! He must have put twenty-two slugs into *two—different—bears!*"

Part I of a thrilling and timely serial . . . . .

WHEN Johnny Burton, American Pursuit Pilot, parachuted down into the Burmese Jungle, he met the very unexpected in a group of cut-off human beings who were fighting a bitter war of their own while waiting for liberation forces to come from the west and south.

All in our next issue

And a unique and enterprising bunch of people they were—as Johnny found out when he enlisted in their private war against the Jap marauders.

THE THOUSAND DEATHS OF BURMA

by H. Bedford-Jones

Well, there was Henry, the unpredictable Sheriff of Wild Horse Valley and his two indomitable aides—see cut → And then there was Tombstone Todd who had a job at forty a week (no, not month, mind you) for life, and was only afraid he wouldn't live long enough to collect it.

BY THE NAME OF SMITH

A hilarious and tense novelette in our next issue . . . . . .

W. C. TUTTLE

You hear some men tell that they owe a lot to some woman, wife or mother, maybe—well, you can owe a lot to the desert, too. You'll meet an unforgettable desert dweller in

"Sand in the Eyes of the Enemy"
ANDREW H. HEPBURN

"High Grading Midas"
CLAY PERRY

"The Fighting Irish"
WILLIAM HEUMAN

"American to the Rescue"
EDWARD DALY

"Rails West" **CHARLES W. TYLER**

SHORT STORIES September 10th

THE 16 CLUB

I

FOUR fighter pilots from the flattop *Vulcan* had shot down sixteen Nippo planes apiece. These men did not answer to the roll call any longer. They were dead. None of them had ever downed his seventeenth Jap ship. These were the simple facts.

Beneath these facts was something else. It had begun to flow as a sluggish current on the day the second man of the sixteen-club had died. The current gained in strength when the third man's name was stricken from the list. When the fourth man's Hellcat hit the sea in flames, the current changed to a malignant force, more dangerous because of its suppression. It was denied the antiseptic of discussion, because the men aboard the *Vulcan* wouldn't talk about it.

Huck Fallon was an ace, a first rate flier and a cold, deliberate fighter, qualities which did not conform to his appearance. He was big-boned, angular, unhandsome. He moved with a limber awkwardness which was always surprising in its accuracy. Some people liked him, others didn't. Those who liked him were the ones who'd taken time to dig beneath the surface of his natural reticence. Those who didn't like him were the ones who were annoyed at the bland self-confidence he made no effort to conceal, or flaunt. He simply wore it as he wore his clothes, a matter which had given rise to speculation. The accepted theory was, among the men who knew him least:

"The big hick simply lacks imagination. He hasn't any nerves because he hasn't sense enough to let a Zero scare him."

The theory stood up well enough until Huck Fallon bagged his fifteenth Jap. Sustained by the excitement of the hop, he didn't think much about his score until he

By JACKSON V. SCHOLZ

Author of "Ring Gunner," etc.

got back to the *Vulcan*. Even then it came upon him only by degrees that he was logical next member for the sixteen-club.

He was playing acey-deucey that same evening in the ward room when the significance of his candidacy placed its full weight upon his thoughts. He was playing against his bunk-mate, Jim Colby. Fallon rolled the dice and let them lay, staring at them but not seeing them.

"Anything wrong, Huck?" Colby asked.

"Huh?" Fallon raised his head, and a slow color crept into his face. His Adam's apple made a round trip as he swallowed. "Hell, no," he denied. "Nothing's wrong." He went on with the game, concentrating hard to keep from blundering.

Nothing exciting happened aboard the *Vulcan* for the next week or so, but it was a bad period for Huck Fallon, a period wherein he was attacked by recurring moods of thoughtfulness. It may have been only his imagination, but there were also times when he felt that the men were looking at him strangely. He never had the chance to learn for sure, because they always turned their eyes away on these occasions, refusing to meet his squarely.

THERE was one exception, Klem Tully. Tully was another fighter pilot, and, if there was a man aboard whose dislike for Fallon was clear-cut and unconcealed, Tully was the guy. Fallon hadn't found it pleasant to have Tully as a shipmate. Huge as it was, the *Vulcan* was too small for that.

It was an unfortunate break of luck that both of them happened to be there. They had met before, many times, on the cinders of the track-field and on the boards of indoor

. . . . Ready to Chew Clouds—but How About that Jinx?

running tracks. As top flight middle distance men, they had competed against each other often. The races always had been close, with Fallon winning most of them outdoors, and with Tully winning most of them on boards.

They hadn't liked each other then because their thoughts and natures were too far apart. Fallon had competed on the track with the same cool steadiness he now used to fight Japs in the air. Tully's methods, also, had not changed. He had run with a driving, hell-for-leather fury which he applied now in his fighting. His hair was red, his temper short. His face was wide-jawed like a bulldog.

The last race which either of them had run had been upon the boards of Madison Square Garden, for the 600 yard national indoor championship. They were the two top men, and both were primed to win.

The accident took place when the eight runners, all fighting for position, had bunched hard upon the first turn. Someone elbowed Fallon in the jam, throwing him off stride. As he staggered to regain balance, his short spikes raked the calf of the man ahead of him, Klem Tully. Fallon went on to win the race, and Tully tried to slug him in the dressing room, claiming he'd been spiked deliberately by Fallon.

They met for the next time on the *Vulcan,* and Tully had not changed his mind about the race. He took up where he had left off, accepting the only available form of competition offered by the *Vulcan*—the bagging of Jap planes. Tully's score at the moment, was thirteen.

So Tully let his eyes meet Fallon's every chance he had. He let amusement show, and a touch of contempt, too, because he probably knew what was going on in Fallon's mind. Full membership in the sixteen-club. Then what?

The next call to battle stations sounded on a Monday morning. The *Vulcan* had been on the prowl in a business-like manner for the past several days, as if her skipper had something definite in mind.

The clamor of battle stations sent its summons through the ship before the pilots had had a chance to digest their breakfast. The thundering of the gongs and the blaring of loud speakers caused some subtle change in Huck Fallon's interior which made him doubt that he'd digest the meal at all. It seemed to fill his stomach like a lump of concrete.

Instinct sent him toward his room on the double, where he scooped up his flying gear and his plotting board. Jim Colby got there at the same time. He was small, peppery and active. Both men worked at high speed in the tiny cabin, but experience had synchronized their efforts to the point where there was no confusion. They headed for the ready room together. On the way, Colby said:

"If my amateur navigation talents are worth a damn we're snoopin' around in a warmish part of the Pacific. I'll bet I could get to Ponape from here in a box kite."

They reached the ready room, found seats, and unlimbered their plotting boards. The information was coming down from air-plot. The "talker" was taking the dope through his ear phones, and relaying it to a sailor who chalked it up on a blackboard. Fallon automatically jotted down the stuff he'd need, weather conditions above target, point option, and the approximate spot where the *Vulcan* could be found after the mission of her planes was carried out. The men about him were intently copying the same data.

Commander Olsen then gave them the information in which they were really interested. He said:

"It's a convoy. One of our subs picked it up late yesterday afternoon, and figured it was headed for Ponape. Our scouts confirmed this at daylight. It looks like the Japs are taking a long gamble to reinforce Ponape with troops and supplies, because they're risking considerable shipping. There are two troop ships and three cargo ships. They must be taking in important stuff because they've sent three destroyers and a light cruiser to ride herd. The Army's sending some four-motored jobs over from the Marshalls, but we're in a spot to get there first. As much as we love the Army, we won't be sore if you guys don't leave much for 'em to mop up. Any questions?"

The loud-speaker ordered, "Pilots man your planes." Several seconds later the ready room was empty. Fallon could hear the familiar thunder of the motors being warmed up on the flight deck. The sound died gradually before he got there, as the motors of the crowded ships were stopped to eliminate

the danger from the spinning props as the pilots climbed aboard.

The mass of planes seemed tangled in a hopeless jumble, the fighters out ahead, the bombers and torpedo planes behind, their wings still raised rakishly above the fuselage. It looked like a matter of catch-as-catch-can, but every pilot, knowing exactly where his ship was stationed, reached it promptly, and climbed into the cockpit.

Fallon's plane captain, Spike Kelly, was a relic of the prize ring, his flat nose and his fluted ears suggesting he had abandoned his profession just in time. Tough as he looked, however, he tucked Huck Fallon in the Hellcat with the gentleness of a mother putting her first-born into a crib. He was nuts about Huck Fallon, and he knew his Hellcats.

"She's singin' a sweet song, sir," he reported. "She's ready to chew clouds."

This was part of Kelly's usual ritual. Normally, there was more to it. Previously, he'd always added, "Give 'er a Jap to shoot at, sir, that's all she wants."

But he didn't add it this time. He also avoided Fallon's startled glance of inquiry, as he busied himself with the adjusting of Fallon's throat mike. Fallon started to say something, but the bull horn on the "island" cut him short. It bellowed:

"Prepare to start engines!"

Kelly hopped to the deck, engaged the crank, and went to work. The energizing wheels of other ships were starting their high whine. Once more the bull horn:

"Stand clear of propellers!"

Then, "Start engines."

Fallon hauled on the starting toggle. The two thousand horses in the Hellcat's nose began to snort and grumble—then caught hold with a loud bellow. Fallon throttled down, and waited for his turn to leave the deck.

The white launching flag snapped open on the bridge, and the launching officer took over on the deck. When Fallon's turn came he released his brakes, gunned gently, and let the mechanics at his wing-tips guide the Hellcat to the starting line. Once there he moved the four blades of his prop to full low pitch, and watched the launching officer's baton. When the signal came he slid his throttle open, heard the thunder of the motor, and felt the seat press hard against his back. In another few seconds he was off. The square-tipped wings of his heavy ship found anchorage on the air, and the ship became as light as thistle-down. Clear of the deck he banked to the left to keep his prop wash from the man behind him. He brought up his landing gear, and climbed toward the formation level.

Two divisions of fighters, six planes each, headed on the mission to protect the dive bombers and torpedo planes. The third division stayed with the *Vulcan* for her protection, on the off chance that Japs might spot her, and send bombers. Huck Fallon was leader of the second division. He flew point, as the Hellcats veed back from him in groups of two.

He went on oxygen at eight thousand, inasmuch as they were climbing steadily to the point where they would cover the heavy-duty ships at twenty-two thousand feet.

Huck Fallon, sitting easily at his controls, felt better than he'd felt for several days. It was no surprise to him, because the cockpit of a hot, fast ship always lifted him above himself, as if the very act of leaving earth behind for the clean freedom of the high thin air gave freedom to his mind as well. His heavy insulation of self-confidence was back again.

It remained intact when the leader of the squadron, Barry Maitland chuckled:

"Thar she blows, gents. As fine a flock of sitting ducks as you could ask for. Keep your eyes peeled for the Zeros."

Huck Fallon glanced below. The visibility was good. The clouds, big puffs of cumulus were high today. He saw the Nippo convoy, or, more accurately, saw the wakes of the ships first. It helped him to spot the ships themselves, minute black seeds upon the water far below.

He didn't watch them long, however. The convoy itself was none of his concern. It belonged to the torpedo planes and bombers. He saw them form into an attacking echelon, but didn't watch them, either. He kept his eyes upon the white bellies of the clouds above. If the Zeros were on hand, that's where they'd be.

They were on hand, all right. He saw the first one pop out of a cloud like a missile from a pea-shooter. Maitland saw it too, and warned:

"Heads up! Two o'clock!" Then, as more

Jap planes appeared: "They're cloudin' up to rain! What—only about twenty of 'em? Hell, they're always sendin' boys to do men's work. Okay, steady, now!"

II

FALLON didn't let Maitland's observation kid him, nor did any of the others. The men behind the Hellcats' guns were seasoned to the point where their respect for Zeros was profound. Light, under-armored, the small Jap crates could get around like bats. There was logic and horse-sense behind the adage, that, if a Zero gets a chance to dive on you, go home, son, where you're safe.

The catch to a mission of this sort, however, was that a fighter's hide was subjugated in importance to the bigger job at hand. He was there to protect the bombing ships below, to give them a chance to lay their eggs, to blow the convoy into splinters. If Zeros grabbed the altitude, then it was just too bad. Just stick around and soak up Nippo steel. Keep an eye cocked to the bombers in their vulnerable stage of peeling off. Give 'em a chance to line their bomb sights on the target.

The Japs were getting ready to peel off, but Maitland kept the Hellcats in formation. Huck Fallon knew what it was all about. The Hellcats had used this strategy before, and it had worked. For, despite the apparent overpowering odds there were still several elements in favor of the Yank fighters.

To start with, the Nippos didn't care for Hellcats. The former Wildcats had caused them enough grief, and now that the Wildcats' big brothers had showed up, the Japs had twice as much respect. Respect engendered fear, and fear engendered recklessness, a fact which always gave a cool Hellcat pilot the advantage.

There was another factor, too, which concerned the present set-up. Having been trained in a certain attack strategy, the Jap could usually be counted on to follow it through in spite of hell and high water. In attacks of this sort, they always preferred balcony seats, like they had today. The next step was to dive on the fighters, and if a Zero pilot missed his target he was supposed to keep right on going for a pot-shot at the bombers which were peeling off below.

So far so good. They had their upstairs seats, but the Hellcats, all throttled back to a cozy two-fifty per, weren't playing fair. Their position was not directly above the bombers. It was behind them. Hence, if a Zero dived and missed his Hellcat, there would be no bomber underneath. It was most confusing. It was a dirty Yankee trick. If the Zeros dived for the bombers first, the Hellcats were in a position to pick the Zeros off like ducks.

The Nippo squadron leader had a brainstorm, which, observed Maitland through the mike, "Was too damn good for a lousy Jap." The Nip divided his command. He sent half of his fighters at the Hellcats and the other half at the bombers. Yank strategy, however, had anticipated this move, too.

With crates still throttled back, the Hellcats tightened their formation slightly. Maitland repeated:

"Steady, now. Wait for the command."

It was a bad moment. Huck Fallon didn't like this waiting business, but his hand stayed steady on the stick, because his faith in Maitland's judgment was deep-seated.

THE Japs came whooping at the Hellcats. They had swung around, and were making the attack from the rear. The Hellcats, their tails exposed, sat there like trusting hens. Fallon watched the Japs with an occasional glance. He pulled the charging handle for his wing guns.

The Japs came down too steeply. They usually did when pouncing on a Hellcat. Some quirk of Oriental logic seemed to make them feel that it was necessary, that added speed might help their bullets through the Hellcat's armored hide.

Some of the Nip slugs were already on their way. Some of the trigger-happy little monkeys opened up before they had a decent chance to line their sights, gambling on the hope that a wild slug might find its mark. No harm in trying.

Huck Fallon saw the tracers fizzing past. The Nips were using red ones, rosy balls of fire. They looked like decorations for a Christmas tree, but Fallon didn't let that fool him. A hard jerk on the stick snapped his head toward the right wing. A small chunk was missing from its leading edge.

Fallon began to feel like a clay pigeon. The sky was heating up. He was ready, now, for Maitland's order.

It crackled through the earphones, "Gun 'em!"

Fallon flipped his throttle forward, and felt the sudden surge of power against his back. His motor, tired of loafing, bolted like a race horse with the bit between its teeth. The other Hellcats acted in the same explosive manner.

The Zeros, committed by this time to the headlong steepness of their dives, were traveling much too fast for the pilots to correct their aims on such short notice. In other words, the Nips were caught flat-footed. They hadn't tumbled to the fact that the Hellcats had been throttled down, so when the Hellcats increased their speed by a hundred miles per hour, there was nothing the Japs could do about it but to dive harmlessly past the tails of their intended victims.

Huck Fallon made a quick check-up, and found that all of the Hellcats had survived the Nippos, first attack. So much for that. The job ahead of them was now clear-cut. The remaining Zeros, intent upon the bombers down below, were howling past the Hellcats, noses about a thousand yards ahead. Maitland snapped:

"Let's get 'em!" and the Hellcats dipped into their power dives.

The maneuver had been neatly timed. The present position of the Hellcats gave them complete advantage. They went slashing in like vengeful streaks of lightning, and Fallon saw they would arrive in time to intercept the second Jap contingent before the Zero pilots could draw close beads on the bombers.

Most of the dive bombers were still in echelon, which gave each Hellcat pilot, according to his position, the chance to pick a bomber to protect. The whole maneuver had been worked out in blackboard drill back on the *Vulcan*. There was virtually no chance for confusion.

Huck Fallon made his mental calculation swiftly, spotting the dive bomber which, at the moment, was his particular responsibility. He also spotted the Zero which was lining its sights on this same bomber. Huck Fallon nudged his rudder, put light pressure on his stick, judged his angle nicely, and went in for the kill.

It looked like a chunk of nice cold meat. The Nip's cockpit was exposed. In another instant it would appear upon the cross-lines of Fallon's reflector sight. His finger rested lightly on the trigger.

The next moment would be calibrated in split seconds. From this point on it should be no more than straight routine. Yet, in that fleeting space of time, something completely unpredictable happened to Huck Fallon, something which he could not fathom, because he had never known its like before.

His trigger-finger stiffened, took on a rigidity which threatened his ability to close it on the trigger. A door flew open in his mind as from the impact of a mighty shoulder. A thought flashed through the door, a thought which he had believed to be completely subjugated to his will. It came out ugly, stark and naked. The kill he was about to make would bring his score to sixteen Japs, and no man aboard the *Vulcan* had ever lived to bag his seventeenth. He knew that, if he pressed that trigger, he'd be eligible for the fate which had overtaken four men just as good as he.

Huck Fallon snarled, "You dirty, yellow louse!" and he didn't mean the Nip. He meant himself.

HE APPLIED pressure to his trigger finger. It was one of the greatest physical efforts he had ever made. He felt the bucking recoil of his six big guns, but he knew, as soon as the bullets left the muzzles, that he'd missed his target. He had waited a fraction of a second longer than he should have waited, a fact confirmed by the yellow, fuzzy pattern of his tracers. They missed the cockpit cleanly, smashing into the fuselage behind the pilot.

Fallon's only consolation was, that the burst had served its purpose, temporarily, at least. The jolt of the .50-caliber slugs had thrown the Jap's aim off his target. It also threw a scare into the Nip, reminding him of his exposed position. He kicked his ship into a steeper dive, adding a half-turn for good measure. Huck Fallon's second burst went wild. He heard a sardonic voice across the radio. He recognized Klem Tully's voice.

"What happened, Fallon? You had 'im cold. You wouldn't be superstitious, would you?"

Maitland snarled, "Shut up, Klem, and get to work!"

It was sound advice, because there was plenty of work to be done. The first group of Zeros which had dived at the Hellcats were back in the fight once more. Six of the second group of Zeros would never fight again. The Hellcats had slashed them into tatters.

Huck Fallon, a cold doorknob in his stomach, went down after the Jap he'd missed. Fallon, for the first time in his life, was scared, not scared of bullets, but scared of what was going on inside himself.

It was almost as if he were a stranger to the Hellcat's cockpit, as if the hands and feet on the controls belonged to someone else. What had happened to his cool, calm, wicked style of fighting? It was no longer with him. It had been replaced by a headlong urgency to kill another Jap, by way of proof that he had guts enough to do it. He went about the job with an unaccustomed violence which his Hellcat didn't like. Missing his light touch on the stick, it showed its temperament.

Fallon had picked an elusive opponent. He tried to tell himself, at least, that this is why he couldn't get the Nippo back upon his sights. He concentrated on the job, tried to relax. He concentrated to the point where he pulled a blunder he had never pulled before. He forgot to watch his rear-view mirror. His first warning came across the radio:

"Your tail, Huck! For God's sake, watch your tail!"

Fallon's instinct probably saved his life. Making no attempt to spot the man behind him, he yanked the Hellcat up into a steep chandelle, just as a bushel of Jap slugs slammed into his crate behind the cockpit. He felt a numbing shock against his back, and recognized the feeling. A bullet had glanced off the armor plate of his seat. Damn close! Too close!

He kicked off at the top of his chandelle, and held the Hellcat in a dizzy slip. He had a pair of Nips on his hands now, and they chewed the Hellcat up a bit before he managed to break clear. It took him longer to do this than he cared to contemplate. He wasn't flying with the soft, deft touch to which he was accustomed. He was trying to mix attack tactics with escape tactics, which wasn't good sense in a case like this. He was trying too desperately to bag his sixteenth Jap.

When he finally did break clear, it was probably through no fault of his own. It was the Japs who actually broke it off, probably through orders from their leader. They headed toward the sea to concentrate on bombers.

Huck Fallon followed, diving hard toward the fight which was still boiling down below. He went off of oxygen at ten thousand feet. In another moment he was in the thick of things.

The fight raged on, but Fallon couldn't get his Jap. He increased his efforts, and soon fell into the class of a boxer swinging hay-makers. It was a miracle some Jap did not nail *him,* but he lived to get the chance he wanted.

It was handed to him like a planked steak on a platter. Through no efforts of his own, a Zero was suddenly in his sights. He squeezed the trigger, and sent the full weight of all his guns into the Zero cockpit. Instantly his radio came to life with sharp, vindictive comment:

"Damn you, Fallon! I had that monkey cold! I was on his tail! He belonged to me! You stole him!" It was Tully's voice.

But Huck Fallon scarcely heard it. He was now a full-fledged member of the Sixteen Club. He was eligible now for the tragedy which such membership suggested. He jammed the implication far back in his mind, and set out to break the jinx.

He didn't break it, because the remaining Japs high-tailed for home a short time after that. The convoy was a burning mass of wreckage down below. The warships had abandoned it—those, at least, which could get away. The cruiser was sinking by the stern.

The *Vulcan's* planes formed for their homeward trip. Some had been left behind. Three Hellcats were missing from the wedge but Huck Fallon's was still there.

He hadn't landed yet, however, and fatal landing crashes *did* occur. The sea was smooth, but Fallon brought his Hellcat in with caution, aware, for the first time since his training days, that landing on a flight deck was a tricky matter.

He almost bungled it. His hook caught just in time to keep his crate from hurtling into the taut cables of the crash barrier. A

group of mechanics sprinted to the Hellcat, disengaged the hook, and wheeled the fighter past the lowered barrier, to make room for the next ship circling to land. Fallon climbed stiffly from the cockpit. Spike Kelly demanded anxiously:

"Did you get another, sir?"

"Yes," said Fallon. Then, "Just *one*, Kelly."

"Oh," said Kelly tonelessly.

III

NO ONE aboard the *Vulcan* mentioned Fallon's latest claim to prominence; not to his face, at any rate, but he could sense the subtle change in their attitudes toward him. They began to show him an involuntary consideration. They talked to him too much, too cheerily. Without intention, they were handing out the sort of stuff which might be offered to a guy whose nerves were on the ragged edge. Clumsily, they were working hard to bolster his morale. And probably their own, as well, Huck Fallon figured shrewdly.

He tried to clear his thoughts by debating the matter with his bunk-mate, Colby. One evening in their cabin, Fallon said:

"These guys are going to drive me nuts. Why don't they come right out and say, 'Relax, Fallon. Don't worry any more. We'll hang out a nice gold service star for you.' Hell, Sam, are they screwy, or am I?"

"I guess we all are—a little," Colby said. "Fliers are a superstitious bunch, and that old sixteen bugaboo has sort of got us by the ears. It's nothing but coincidence, of course," he hastened to amend. "But a coincidence like that can be dangerous on a ship like this. How do you feel about it?" he demanded pointedly. "Does it worry you."

"Yeah," admitted Fallon. "It does. I honestly don't believe I'm scared of getting killed, but it's a bigger responsibility than I've ever faced before. *Someone's* got to break that jinx before the ship can settle down. I'm the logical guy to do it—except that—"

"Except what?" Colby asked as Fallon hesitated.

"Well, damn it, Jim," said Fallon thoughtfully. "I didn't think I had a nerve in me until the last few days, and now I find I'm jittery as a cat."

"You've just discovered that you're human. That's all."

"It's a hell of a time to find it out. I flew like a cluck today. I've lost my touch. I'm worried green about it. I must *believe* in that jinx, Sam. Maybe there *is* something to it. Some force none of us can understand. Maybe—"

"Aw, pipe down!" growled Colby. "You're talking yourself into a spin."

Huck Fallon forced a grin. "Maybe I am, at that," he said.

He tried to keep his thoughts in line, but an incident which occurred the following day did not help much. He was walking restlessly upon the flight deck, when, for no clear reason, he headed aft toward where his Hellcat was lashed securely to the sunken ringbolts on the deck. As he approached the crate, he saw Spike Kelly talking earnestly to one of the other plane captains.

Fallon recognized the other machinist mate as a man by the name of Kruger, a former bookie, who, it was rumored, would gamble on anything. This fact received apparent confirmation before his eyes when he saw Kelly hand Kruger some folding money. Kruger pocketed the money, handed Kelly a slip, then, seeing Fallon about that time, Kruger beat an alarmed retreat.

Fallon came up, and asked, "What gives, Kelly?"

Kelly looked as if he'd been caught pouring emery dust in the Hellcat's crank case. He gulped, turned red and stammered:

"Nuh—nothing, sir."

"Looked like you were investing in another one of Kruger's pools. What's he promoting this time?"

"I—I, it's nothing, sir," croaked Kelly.

Huck Fallon got it then, without straining his intuition too severely.

"So that's it, huh?" he grinned, trying to look amused. "The guy's making book on *me*. What odds did you get out of him?"

"Even odds, sir," blurted Kelly.

"Sound reasonable," said Fallon.

"Look, sir," Kelley explained desperately. "I'm going to take that louse for heavy jack. I'm going to double every cent I've saved since I've been on this ship, a hundred and sixty smackers. I've got my chips all on you, sir."

"Money in the bank, Spike. Money in the bank," Huck Fallon told him. "Keep the old gal tuned, and I'll have another Nip for you in no time." He thumped Kelly's arm reassuringly with his big fist, then started back along the flight deck. There was a rubbery feeling in his knees, a thin mist of perspiration on his forehead. So the *Vulcan's* personnel was gambling that he would, or would not bag his seventeenth Jap crate. It was a gruesome thought, at best, and certainly not one to forward the best interests of the *Vulcan.* If a fifth man failed to clear hurdle number seventeen, the morale aboard this flat-top might get shot to hell.

Klem Tully had knocked down another pair of Zeros in the fight north of Ponape. It brought Tully's score to fifteen, and the change in him was noticeable. He was sullen, irritable, almost unapproachable. Fallon gave him a wide berth. He didn't want to tangle with the guy. A nasty brawl at this stage wouldn't help things any.

Huck Fallon found himself awaiting with impatient tautness his next air fight with the Japs. He wanted to get it over with, settle the matter one way or another. He was almost in a psychopathic state when the long-awaited "battle stations" finally sounded.

IT WAS another Japanese convoy, trying, this time, to sneak unnoticed into the bomb-battered bastion of Truk. The *Vulcan,* and her escort destroyers, plowed the sea in that direction, traveling at top speed. The fliers hurried to the ready room for briefing, then hurried to their planes. A short time later they were in the air.

Huck Fallon tried to shake his muscles loose, but he didn't make much headway. He cursed himself for a superstitious, medieval moron, but he didn't get far that way, either. He could sense the feelings of the man who flew with him. They were in the mess almost as deeply as he was himself. None of them wanted to believe that sixteen was the limit for any man aboard the *Vulcan.* The present hop, therefore, was virtually a clinical experiment, with Huck Fallon as the guinea pig. If Fallon bagged another Jap — and got back home to tell about it, the men would be convinced a curse of some sort had been lifted from the ship. It was entirely up to Fallon.

But Huck Fallon didn't get his Jap, although a swarm of Truk-based Zeros were aloft to give protection to their convoy. He fought with everything he had, but he staged a clumsy, blundering ineffective show.

Tiny leering devils of superstition danced brazenly along the surface of his wings. He tried to sweep them off with the very violence of his maneuvers, but the little devils clung like fleas.

He flew with desperation through the lacy pattern of the tracers in the sky. On two occasions it really looked as if he had his Nip pinned back against the ropes, but the little monkeys slipped away, to leave Huck Fallon's mind confused and sick.

He caught quick flashes of the other men, a whim of Fate bringing Klem Tully into his line of vision more repeatedly than any of the others. He saw that Tully was staging his usual reckless, slashing sort of fight, even more so, because the mark of desperation showed in Tully's fighting, too.

Fallon saw Klem Tully get his sixteenth plane. Tully blew the Jap to shreds, became a full-fledged member of the Sixteen Club, but Tully didn't see the Zero on his tail. It poured a burst in Tully's Hellcat. Flame spurted from the engine cowl, and fanned back toward the cockpit. The Hellcat went into a slip, and that's the last Huck Fallon saw of it. A Zero was on his own tail.

There was also a churning sickness in his stomach. If he had needed further proof of the sword which hung above him by a thread, the bright burning of Tully's plane drove home conviction solidly.

Why try to buck a game where all the cards were stacked against you? Why battle the inevitable? Why kid himself that he could change the writing on the wall? The thought, he knew, was traitorous to every decent instinct he had clung to, yet he couldn't summon enough will-power to subdue it.

His evasive work against the Japanese on his tail was sloppy. He was well aware of this, but somehow didn't seem to care. He knew, in a vague way, that he was quitting, but that didn't seem to matter either. Instinct kept him trying to escape, but there was lethargy instead of brilliance to his flying. The Jap would nail him soon, and he hoped it would be over swiftly, painlessly.

It wasn't. The Nippo over-shot. He

missed the cockpit, hit the motor. A cannon ball exploded in the Hellcat's power plant, wrecking it. Huck Fallon nosed into a screaming dive, and headed for the water down below. The Nippo did not follow, for the reason that another Hellcat promptly blew him from the sky.

Huck Fallon toyed with the idea of staying with his plane until it crashed, but that was even more than his new indifference toward life could stomach. He leveled off at five thousand feet, pushed back the hatch above his head, then rolled the Hellcat on its back. The next moment he was tumbling through the air, his fingers wrapped around the handle of his rip-cord. He hauled on the release, and waited. A violent jerk arrested his descent as the parachute snapped open.

Swinging high above the sea, Huck Fallon looked around. The burning convoy was some distance back, and the planes engaged above it were mere specks in the air. Looking down, he saw with an involuntary grunt of pure astonishment, that he would land close to a tiny atoll. It was no more than a barren patch of sand, but it was dry land, at least, a better break than he'd expected of his present luck.

His attention focused sharply on the figure of a man who stood upon the atoll watching him. There was no way to identify the fellow from this distance, but Fallon felt the quick hope that it might be a member of his own squadron. He judged that he would land about two hundred yards off shore.

He yanked the two toggles at the bottom of his life vest, and heard the hiss of gas as the vest inflated from the tiny cylinders. The water was getting closer now, so he reached above him, and, with a hand upon each riser, began to swing his body back and forth to lessen the chance of landing directly beneath the smothering folds of the chute.

He timed it nicely. He landed clear with a heavy splash, then promptly yanked the release handle of his harness. In another instant he was floating free, bobbing in the warm ocean like a cork.

He reached for the pack containing his life raft, but sensibly glanced toward shore before he opened it. It was well he did, because the glance showed that the man awaiting him was Japanese. To eliminate further doubt, the Jap had a pistol in his hand, and there was no mistaking his intention.

IV

FALLON gave the matter thought, and began to get a little sore about it. He might have inflated his raft and paddled away from the island, but this procedure did not strike his fancy. The brand of fatalism, to be sure, still rested strong upon him, but he told himself that he'd be damned if he would run away from any more brown monkeys.

Using the raft to reach the island would make him too clear a target, so he started paddling toward the Jap instead, leaving only his head exposed.

When Fallon was a hundred yards from shore, the Jap could restrain himself no longer. He tried a pair of shots, both wide. Fallon stopped, pulled his own .45 from its holster, and sent a slug in the Jap's direction, just to warn the Nip that he was armed.

The shot must have been a lucky one, because the Jap ducked involuntarily, then tried to save his face with three more shots in Fallon's direction. Fallon tucked his gun back in its holster, and continued his steady progress toward the shore.

The shots got closer, some spraying Fallon's face with salty water. It stung his eyes. He blinked, and kept on coming. The Nippo kept on shooting. He exhausted his first clip, and Fallon saw his jerky, excited motions as he slapped another clip into the gun.

The Nip was jittery, of course, but even so it seemed incredible to Fallon that none of the bullets found its mark. It seemed a little wacky, made him wish he had more time to think about it.

A hundred and fifty feet from shore, Huck Fallon's shoes touched bottom. Pretending he was still afloat, he let his knees bend as the slope of the sand increased, and took him closer to the shore. He continued in this manner for another fifty feet, with bullets chugging viciously about his head.

When he judged himself to be about hip-deep, he suddenly stood up, his gun in hand. He could see a surprised shock hit the Jap. The Jap tried to steady his aim with both hands, but Fallon snapped a shot at him before the Nip could pull the trigger. Fallon's

shot went wide, but so did the Jap's. Fallon started plowing steadily toward shore, when a strange thing happened. The Nippo placed the muzzle of his gun against his own head, pulled the trigger, blew his brains out.

"Well I'll be damned!" Huck Fallon marveled.

Wading from the water, he stared down at the dead Jap. Something was trying to take form in Fallon's mind. He picked up the Jap's pistol, and found it to be empty. The Jap had saved the last shot for himself.

"Just a quitter," Fallon summed it up. And then the vagueness left his thoughts. "Just a quitter," he repeated, "like Huck Fallon. The Jap didn't have the guts to gamble with his final shot, and neither did Huck Fallon. They both curled up and quit."

HE FELT a lot better after that, despite the seriousness of his predicament. The atoll was no larger than two hundred yards in length or breadth—just sand. Looking around Fallon saw the chute in which the Jap had landed from the recent fight. Beyond that there was nothing else of interest.

Taking stock of things, Fallon was grateful for his small emergency pack, whose principal content was the chemical device for turning salt water into a brackish liquid which could be safely drunk. There were also limited rations, first-aid stuff, and a mirror gun which would aim a flash of light at a distant point.

Suddenly Fallon heard a shout behind him, "Hey, there!"

He spun about, grabbed at his gun, then suddenly realized that an enemy would have shot before he called. Squinting eyes against the glare, he finally made out a small life raft directly in the path of the sun upon the water. The raft had almost reached the shore. Shading his eyes, Huck Fallon recognized its occupant—Klem Tully.

Hurrying to the water's edge, Fallon said wonderingly, "Well I'll be damned! I thought they got you."

Tully's face was pale and strained. "Not yet," he answered bleakly. He beached the rubber craft and said, "I sprained my ankle bailing out. I guess you'll have to help me."

"Sure," said Fallon.

Once ashore, Tully eased himself upon the sand. Fallon watched him closely, because the man was almost at the cracking point. His lips twitched, and his eyes were glassy. He seemed to have forgotten all of his former enmity toward Fallon. Trying to snap him from his funk, Huck Fallon said:

"Well, looks like we were lucky after all."

"Lucky?" repeated Tully hollowly. "Don't be a plain damn fool. Our numbers are up. You know it as well as I do. We *would* have been lucky if we'd both been killed outright. This way, we'll simply starve—go nuts. The best that can happen to us is to get picked up by the Nips—and you know what *that* means. It's in the books, I tell you. We've both knocked down sixteen Jap crates."

Fallon took a pack of cigarettes and matches from his water-proof case. He offered a cigarette to Tully. Tully grabbed it hungrily, and lighted up, hauling long drags into his lungs. Fallon lighted one for himself, then sat down on the sand.

He began to talk. Words, as a rule, came hard to him, but he found an unexpected ease with them just now. He talked partly to Tully, partly to himself, getting stuff off his chest, putting into words the things which snarled his mind and fouled his judgment. His thoughts came clearer as he talked, and he was able to interpret them into terms of common sense in contradiction to the weird, distorted beliefs he had permitted in his brain.

He told at last about the Jap whom he had found upon the island, how the Jap had had every chance to kill him, but had gone in for hara-kiri in the end. Huck Fallon drew a careful, sane conclusion from the incident.

He gazed across the water as he talked, gradually aware that, from an occasional covert glance, Klem Tully's eyes came slowly to his face and stayed there. He could feel the tension leaving Tully, replaced by an almost pathetic eagerness to believe the words which Fallon spoke. Fallon ended with:

"It seems to add up, Klem. We were both quitters, like the Jap. I was scared, scared green, and afraid to admit it to myself. But, as I see it now, I've licked the jinx."

"So what?" said Tully sourly. "You'll

probably never get a chance to prove it."

"Yes," said Fallon carefully. "I'll get a chance. We both will."

"How? We've got Japs on all sides of us."

Fallon shrugged. "I don't know how, but it's the strongest hunch I've ever had."

Klem Tully nursed the final puff from his cigarette, then tossed it in the sand. He said slowly:

"You're a funny guy. I guess I must have had you wrong. Maybe I'm just a sucker for a pipe dream, but you've damn near made me believe we *will* get back."

Using the dead Jap's parachute for a bed, they spent a reasonably comfortable night on the warm sand of the atoll. Fallon walked off his stiffness in the morning, but Tully, restrained by a swollen ankle, sat and brooded.

Huck Fallon heard the far-off motors first. He shaded his eyes and strained them toward the sound. At the end of several seconds he could see the plane, a tiny dot against the sky. He reached into his pocket for the light gun, which looked like a small ordinary mirror with a little cross cut through the center.

Watching him, Tully said, "You'd better think twice, guy. That's probably a Jap ship."

"Could be," admitted Fallon. "But my hunch feels pretty good. I'm going to play it on the nose."

Klem Tully shrugged, and let it go at that.

THE sun was in a nice position to flash a signal to the distant plane, and Fallon hoped the ship was not too far away. The gadget in his hand was only effective at a maximum of ten miles, and even then a little luck would have to enter in.

He pointed the mirror surface at a point between the airplane and the sun. A small round mirror surrounded the cross slit at the rear of the instrument. Fallon held his open hand beside his head. The sun, shining through the cross-slit threw a bright image of the cross upon his palm. Watching this image in the back mirror, and, at the same time, sighting through the cross-slit at the plane, he moved the instrument carefully until the image on his palm coincided with the cross-slit itself. Then, according to the sextant principle, the flash from the mirror should be directly upon the distant plane.

Fallon held it there until he began to fear he'd missed his sight, then suddenly he saw the plane begin to turn. It was coming toward the atoll. He lowered the glass, and said quietly to Tully:

"Well, it worked."

"Yeah, it worked," said Tully tensely. Then, "By God, Huck! It's one of ours! A P-38!"

"From Eniwetok," Fallon guessed. "Probably a photographic ship on the way to Truk to take some pictures. Boy, look at that baby come! He sees us now!"

The Lightning circled the small atoll several times while Fallon and Tully waved frantically to its pilot. Then, with a reassuring waggle of his wings, the pilot went off about his business.

It was a day of taut, nerve-racking tension. They had one really bad scare when a Jap plane came across high up. They covered themselves with the parachute which blended with the white sand of the island.

"I hope we got under here in time," said Tully.

"So do I," said Fallon. "I guess we made it, though. He's not coming down for a look-see."

They waited awhile longer before coming out from under the smothering heat of the chute into the baking heat of the tropic sun.

"Not much choice," observed Fallon. "I'd almost as soon stew as broil."

Klem Tully's twisted ankle was giving him a lot of trouble by this time. Fallon bandaged it as best he could with strips torn from the chute. As the day wore on, however, Tully succumbed once more to black depression. After several futile trys, Fallon gave up the hopeless job of trying to snap him out of it, a job which was finally taken from his hands successfully by the arrival of a PT boat. It came surging toward the atoll shortly before dark. Watching it come, Tully admitted with hoarse gratitude:

"You had the right dope, guy. You sure guessed right."

The skipper of the PT boat was an ensign by the name of Tolland. When he had the two fliers safely aboard, he confirmed what Fallon had earlier assumed.

"Yeah," said Tolland. "The P-38 was a photo plane. He sent in your location to his base, and the base radioed me to pick you up."

"What now?" asked Fallon.

"You're still lucky. The *Vulcan's* still prowling around these parts. I know her course, and we ought to pick her up about dawn."

"Damn good delivery service," Fallon said.

"The best there is," grinned Tolland.

V

EVEN though the men aboard the *Vulcan* knew that Fallon and Tully had been picked up, the greetings accorded them when they came aboard were somewhat more profuse and filled with vast relief than the occasion seemed to warrant. The occasion appeared to be something more than the mere return of two pilots who had been given up for lost. It was, rather, like the return of twins named Faith and Hope. It occurred to Fallon, with some amusement, that the men shook hands with him as if shaking hands with their own chances for a long and happy life.

He noted, however, that when the excitement calmed a bit, the men still watched him anxiously. He drew an analogy from this, too.

He mentioned it to Jim Colby later in their cabin.

"They look at me," he said, "like a guy who's placed his last dime on a bang-tail, and who goes to the paddock before the race to see how the nag looks. Me, I'm the horse."

"You look like a better bet, however," Colby said calmly, "than you did when you left this ship last time."

"I am a better bet," said Fallon.

"How come?"

Fallon told him what had happened.

"That's good," said Colby, nodding slowly. "It won't take the guys long to recognize the change in you like I did. And it won't hurt 'em a damn bit. They're beginning to believe in gremlins."

"Maybe so," said Fallon. "But there's only one way I can help 'em, and there's nothing I can do aboard this ship."

"Yeah," acknowledged Colby. "I guess you're right. You've got to chalk up another Jap."

"And get back here alive," said Fallon drily.

"I guess that's so," admitted Colby nervously.

The chance to prove his theory came sooner than Huck Fallon had anticipated. It came next day, in fact, and, after his first involuntary wave of apprehension, he was glad the thing could be decided with such promptness.

It was a big show, one of the biggest since the first blasting of the base at Truk. The flat-top, *Thor*, the *Vulcan's* sister ship would be on hand. A battleship, and other heavy naval armament would complete the task force.

The target, the fliers learned in the ready room, was Guam, smack in the center of an area supposedly controlled by Sons of Heaven. It promised action, plenty of it. It might even lure a portion of the Jap fleet from his hiding place. Tension was high, and grins were tight as the men wrote swiftly on their plotting boards.

THE big task force made rendezvous, and churned toward its objective. Long before any of the Marianas were in sight, the flat-tops sent their planes into the air. Dive bombers would deliver the first punch to soften things up for the heavy guns of the warships.

Once in the air, a familiar rigidness began to creep through Fallon's muscles. It scared him to the point of sweating, because he'd believed he had had the matter settled in his mind. He had believed he had reduced the problem to cold facts, and his alarm was genuine to find it still in the theory stage. It still lacked proof, and there was only one way of proving it. He had to get over the invisible barrier of number seventeen. He was aghast and sickened to find the barrier still there. He almost hoped the Japs would not come up to meet them.

But they did. Black swarms of them. They dropped from the sky above like hail. They came down shooting, diving desperately to protect their stolen loot.

A pair of them came at Fallon, while he was still trying doggedly to adjust his thoughts. The Zeros were converging on his tail. He saw them both, but heard two

separate warnings from two *Vulcan* men.

"Heads up, Huck! Coming down at you from six o'clock!"

"Your tail, Huck! Watch it!"

As it was, both Nips had the chance to leave their dives and smother him with steel. The pattern of the tracers all about him made it look as if they'd caught him in a net. If either of the enemy had been good shots, one of them would have nailed him sure. Instead, they let their excitement over cold meat send them off half cocked. Their slugs chewed up Huck Fallon's right wing, and the fuselage behind him. One bullet ripped a groove in the plastic of his green house. Chill air rushed in to slap against the hotness of his face.

He came out of the chandelle into an S.A. turn, hoping for a pot shot at the Zeros if they continued diving—which they didn't. Both Nips were too foxy. One of them held altitude with a tight loop to stay on Fallon's tail. The other flattened out and came boring in from the starboard side. A voice came through the radio:

"Sit tight, Huck! I've got the monkey on your tail! Bingo, there he goes!"

Huck Fallon's rear-view mirror showed the Zero on his tail disintegrate. He turned his attention to the other, banked sharply toward it, and felt the Jap slugs pecking at his horizontal stabilizer.

Fallon held his bank, and the Nippo stuck around. Fallon gave the Hellcat everything he had, but the Hellcat acted like a balky horse, and Fallon knew the fault was his. The plane had absorbed a mauling, sure, but not enough to make it act that way. It was his heavy hand upon the stick, and his clumsy feet upon the rudder bar.

The Jap in the other crate knew how to fly, and he had a sweet ship in which to show his skill. He might have bagged Huck Fallon, if another *Vulcan* Hellcat hadn't pounced upon the Jap instead.

And then it dawned on Fallon what was taking place. The *Vulcan* men were watching out for him, guarding him like something delicate and rare. He doubted very much if they'd discussed the thing before hand, or actually realized what they were doing now. It was a spontaneous demonstration, born of their great fear at losing him, not as an individual, but for what he represented in their scheme of things.

The truth of this hit Fallon like a blackjack on his skull. These men should be protecting the bombers down below, not him. They must have forgotten all of that under the hypnotic urge to bring Huck Fallon back alive. It was incredible, fantastic, but the facts were as plain before him as the instruments on his panel.

Something happened to Huck Fallon then, something which shot up like a mushroom from the welter of his sudden shame. He couldn't name the thing that happened to him. Probably it had no name, but he felt it rippling through his body like a cool, calm stream. His feet went light upon the rudder bar, his hand upon the stick was sensitive and sure. The tension left his eyes, and steadiness crept in. The Hellcat felt the change, and bellowed happily.

He glanced around him, letting the pattern of the fight rest clearly on his vision. It looked like a tangled mess, but each blazing group of fighting ships had its own significance to Fallon—now. Some of the Hellcats were hard pressed, others had the situation in control.

The dive bombers had all peeled off, and there were enough fighters down below to keep them covered—probably the Hellcats from the *Thor*. The brawl up here was tightly knit, with the Hellcats still outnumbered.

One Hellcat, a thousand feet above was in a jam. Fallon saw it belonged to Barry Maitland. Three Zeros, though wary of the Hellcat's fangs, were skillfully working it into position for a kill. Fallon tilted his crate's nose upward, gave it all the power it could absorb, and said:

"Hang on, Barry! Here we come!"

The Hellcat clawed for altitude, and gulped it down in chunks. Fallon was on a level with the dogfight before the Zero pilots noticed him. Then one of them broke off from Maitland, slashing in to head off Fallon.

The Jap got in a long, wild burst before Fallon flipped the Hellcat's nose around to meet him. It began to look as if the Nippo had a ramming job in mind, but Fallon held his fire until the top of the enemy cockpit was dead center in his sights. The Nip would not live long enough to ram.

The Zero's pilot must have doped this out himself, because he lost his nerve, and

went into a twisting dive. Fallon snapped the Hellcat's stick almost against the panel, and the crate went over with a force which boosted Fallon hard against his belt.

He held it in the outside loop, then rolled into a reverse Immelmann which almost snapped his head off. But, even in his moment of sharp dizziness, he found brief time to marvel at the skill which had so suddenly returned to him. A violent, exact maneuver of that sort would have been impossible for him five minutes sooner.

He came out on the Nippo's tail, and the enemy, seeing this, made frantic efforts to escape. But he might as well have tried to flee his shadow. Huck Fallon's touch was back, his deadly calmness in control again. He simply flew, outguessed the Jap as surely as if the Nip had signaled all his tricks beforehand.

In a final desperate try, the Jap went into a squirrel cage, trying to out-turn the Hellcat. The circle tightened, then got tighter still. Plastered hard against his seat, Huck Fallon waited patiently.

The Jap cracked first. He began to slip. Fallon judged the exact instant when the Jap would try to duck to safety. He whipped his Hellcat in, and down. He lined the Zero dead upon his sight, then gently pressed the trigger.

He felt the bucking of his plane, as its tracers slashed into the crate ahead. He held the trigger down and let his bullets tear the Jap to dog meat. The Zero exploded in a ball of flame, which rocked Huck Fallon's ship. No doubt about *that* kill—no doubt at all. The Sixteen Club was just a washed-out memory, now.

The radios began to crackle as the news spread. Huck Fallon had to grin, as the words came bouncing to his ears, excited words, exultant words.

"Huck Fallon got his seventeenth!"

"Ea-a-a-yow! He made it, guys!"

"The choir will now sing, Halleluiah!"

THE fight wound up a short time after that, but not before Huck Fallon had knocked down his eighteenth.

The homeward trip was uneventful, but discipline aboard the *Vulcan* wobbled badly when the fighters came back with the news.

Spike Kelly let the big tears travel frankly down his homely pan.

"And I ain't bawlin', sir," he said, "because you won me all that dough."

"I know you're not, Spike," Fallon said, having a little trouble with the words.

He went next to Tully's cabin. He hadn't realized, until now, that he'd been worried about Tully. Fallon found him on his bunk, still nursing his bad ankle. Tully obviously had heard the news. There was a new expression in his face. His first words were:

"I'm not scared any longer, Huck."

"I'm glad," said Fallon soberly. "Damn glad."

BOOLSFIGHT BEEZNESS

By S. OMAR BARKER

Author of "Hairy Side Out," etc.

Anything That Looked Like Fighting Bulls, They Just Couldn't Resist

"I AIN'T payin' cowhands no forty a month to match bull fights!" snorts the Ol' Man, shaking some acorns out of his shirt tail and forgetting to tuck it back in. "An' by guddlemuddy, I'll shoot the bull an' fire you both if you don't quit it—yuh savvy?"

We savvy. But Kitey (short for Cayetano) Montoya ain't a buckaroo easy discouraged.

"Mebbeso you shooting the bool now—I hope!" he grins. "Eh, Papa Jone?"

The Ol' Man's name is Jonathan D. Huffstedder, but that's too much for this *vaquero compadre* of mine to wrap his Spanish tongue around. Sometimes he calls him Patrón (which is Spanish for Boss), but his real pet name for the Ol' Man is "Papa Jone." Kitey is always calling somebody or something "Papa So-and-So." It's a sign he likes and admires 'em—or at least wants them to think so. Me he calls "Papa Charley." The brindle bull that this ruckus is about is "Papa Tomás," because, as Kitey puts it: "Thees bool, she's the tom-cat *toro* of all the cattles! I think we name heem 'Papa Tomás,' eh?"

Usually the Ol' Man don't seem to mind Kitey's pet name for him, but this time he has just fell out of a tree. Not a big tree. Just a clumpy little ol' scrub oak he happened to be setting under, waiting for Doff Wallace, when this bad-humored bull come lumbering down the draw and took to him. Not Papa Tomás. This was an ol' red longhorn that me and Kitey had just matched against Papa Tomás a mile or so up the draw; and a bull that's just been whupped out of his own herd is a mighty ugly customer for a man on foot to fool with.

The Ol' Man hadn't fooled with him, neither. He had scrambled up into that scrub oak like a chipmunk up a stump. He was still up there, cussin' the acorns inside his shirt, when Kitey and me come along with Papa Tomás. Without even pausing to paw, Papa Tomás choused that red bull off down the draw. As soon as he see the coast was clear the Ol' Man started climbing down off his perch but fell off instead. Naturally it jolted most of the milk of human kindness plumb out of him.

"Don't you 'Papa John' me, you—you durn Mexkin!" He glares at Kitey, then at me and still has a little left for Doff Wallace as that purty-pants *pelicano* comes riding up. "I tell you, I'll—"

"Por diós, Patrón!" Kitey bats his black

eyes and his grin vanishes. "If you want to bawled me out, thass hokay. Keeck me the pants—I don't care. But to call me Meskin—those I do not like!"

"Why not?" throws in Doff Wallace just for free. "You ain't Greek, are you?"

Kitey don't grin like he does when I hurraw him. He sets up in the saddle with a ramrod up his back.

"It ees true I got the Espanish blood," he proclaims. "But I am born American ceetizen—not Meskin!"

"You wasn't born," says Doff Wallace, who fancies himself for a wicked wit. "A buzzard laid you on a stump an' the sun hatched you out. But that don't keep you from bein' a chili-pickin' Mexkin. Not that I've got anything aginst Mexkins—especially the she stuff. In fact I'm figgerin' purty strong on marryin' one of 'em. Her name"—he throws a wink my way—"is Lorinda Gonzales."

"Mientes!" says Kitey. "You lie in your tooths!"

ALL this time his back has been getting stiffer and his neck more bowed. Now his hand starts toward his gun, but for a couple of old 'uns full of liver pills, both me and the Ol' Man can still move purty fast.

The Ol' Man grabs his gun hand and I grab his gun.

"Take it easy, Kitey," says the Ol' Man, kind but firm. "Sure, you're an American citizen—200 percent. But if we're goin' to throw any funerals around here, let's save 'em for cowthieves. Me nor Doff didn't neither one of us mean no insult—did we, Doff?"

Doff Wallace lets wind through his big nostrils and laughs.

"Hell, no!" he says. "Didn't I say—"

"Never mind what you said, blabbermouth!" I butt in sharply. "I don't know but we ort to have let him shoot you! Or would you rather match pistols with *me?*"

"Oh, thass all right, Papa Charley!" says Kitey quickly. "I no like to make some trouble. I'm joost flew off the handles, thass all." He shrugs and grins again. "Thass the trouble weeth us Meskins: too queeck on the tamper!"

Apparently in full good humor again, he reaches down as if to tuck the Ol' Man's shirt tail in for him, but yanks it the rest of the way out instead.

"What wass those you said about shootin' the bool, Papa Jone?"

"I'm dead serious about that, boys," says the Ol' Man. "Charley, I know how you an' Kitey been wastin' your time escortin' bulls around in search of a fight, an' by guddlemuddy I won't have it!"

"Bull," I says.

"Huh?" the Ol' Man's neck hair begins to raise again. "What'd you say, you ol' turkey buzzard?"

"I said *bull,*" I says. "Not bulls. Papa Tomás is the only bull we've been escortin' anywheres lately. Mister Huffstedder, that there *toro* kin *fight!*"

"He don't look like no world beater to me," grunts the Ol' Man skeptically. "There is an ol' yaller lineback ranges over toward Amargoso Crick that I'll betcha could chouse this bobtailed brindle you're braggin' on right outa the corral!"

"I'll jest bet you ten dollars honest money he cain't! When you want me an' Kitey to match 'em?"

"Don't fall off your hoss huntin' your bettin' money," says the Ol' Man dryly. "I've done warned you both about matchin' any more bull fights. While you two half-cocked idiots been tourin' the bull fight circuit, somebody's been hairbrandin' an' sleeperin' my calves all over the damn range. Look yonder at that heifer just comin' in to water! I'll bet she ain't branded no deeper'n I could bite a horseshoe!"

"I'll rope her," says Doff Wallace, "an' we'll find out."

One thing about ol' Doff; you never seen a cowhand that could slope in on a calf, loop him and lay him out faster and neater than he could.

We all take a look and a feel of this heifer's brand. It's as neat a job of singe-'em-now-and-steal-'em later branding as you ever saw. Which means that for the present it *looks* like the calf is branded, so that it's a fair bet she'll be passed in a roundup. Yet by the time she's old enough for a rustler to sneak her away from her Ma, new hair will be growed out over the hide where the brand is supposed to be but ain't, and the rustler can burn whatever deep iron he wants to on her, drift her out with others like her and sell her for honest.

"Light a fire," grunts the Ol' Man.

But Kitey has already got one lit. He takes the running iron off the Ol' Man's saddle, heats it up and draws as perfect a Flying H on that heifer's hip as if it was stamp-ironed.

"One thing about you Mex—I mean you Spanish-Americans—Kitey," observes Doff Wallace, batting them greenish-brown coyote eyes of his, "you sure are handy with a hot iron. It's lucky you an' all your *primos* over on Sapo Creek are *honest,* ain't it?"

"Sure Mike!" grins Kitey. "Thass because we are afraid the esmart Depooty Shereff gonna ketch and put us to the jail!"

That's a crack at ol' Doff, who has now wore a deputy sheriff's badge on his boozem for over three months, but ain't nabbed nary a law-breaker yet. However, there ain't even no hint of sarcasm in Kitey's tone that he can take exception to, but the Ol' Man ain't so subtle.

"Whoever's hair-brandin' my calves don't seem to be afraid of Doff's badge—nor nothin' else," he grumbles. He looks at me and Kitey. "Charley, what do you boys figger we better do?"

"Me, I ain't a figgerin' man," I says. "Bein' jest a half-cocked idiot—like you reminded me a few minutes ago—I check the bet to Mr. Depitty Sheriff Wallace, our Rangeland Sleuth!"

"That's right, Jonathan," says Doff. "You jest leave it to me."

"That's what I been doin'," complains the Ol' Man, "but it ain't win me no marbles."

"It will, though," Doff assures him. "While these boys been matchin' bullfights I been keepin' my eyes open, an' I've got me a clue."

"Clue?" inquires Kitey suspiciously. "Whass those?"

"A clue," I explain, "is when a detective finds a track that ain't there, figgers out which way it didn't go an' follers it up to find out who didn't make it. Is that plain?"

"Sure Mike!" grins Kitey. "Like your nose on my face!"

THAT next Sunday Kitey tells me he's "gonna make some veesit on the *primos,*" and rides off toward the Spanish settlement on Sapo Creek in his best bib an' tucker. I know he's got plenty of cousins over there that he *might* be aiming to visit, but I know there's one amongst the she-stuff that *ain't* his cousin, too.

This Lorinda Gonzalez is as purty a Mex—I mean Spanish-American gal as ever wore glossy black hair with a red ribbon on it, and that ain't all. She's nice, she's smart and so chock full of charm that it even palpitates an ol' *pelicano* like me just to look at her. Furthermore she's the kind of a gal which the man she marries won't never need to worry about the coffee being hot and his socks all darned.

Why Cayetano Montoya ain't dragged her up in front of the *padre* before now would be a mystery to me if I didn't know him so well. Kitey's young enough to be my grandson—purt near—but in the time him and me have been riding for the Flying H together we've gotten to be purty close *compadres;* and while he ain't no hand to blab his personal affairs, he *has* confided in me why he don't try and rush his girl to the altar like the rest of them young Spanish *bravos* do. The reason is that he's saving up his wages so they'll have something to start married life on besides two *tortillas* and a pot of beans.

"Then if we got some keeds," he says, "hokay; they don't got to went to eschool barefoots, alla time nose ronning weethout no *panuelo* to clean it! Eh, Papa Charley?"

"That's right, Kitey," I tell him. "Lorinda's too fine a gal to pen up in poverty. But don't wait too long an' let some *pelicano* puncher pick your peach for you!"

But now it looks like maybe he has. He rides back to the ranch earlier than usual that Sunday night, looking as droop-feathered as a rooster after a rain.

"What's the matter?" I inquire. "Your gal mad because you been helpin' me match bullfights too much instead of sparkin'?"

It's true that for a few Sundays since we found out what a fightin' bull ol' Papa Tomás is, Kitey an' me ain't had time for much else. Anybody that ain't never watched two ol' range bulls put on a battle just can't realize what a fascination there is to it. The way me and Kitey worked it, we'd sorta notice the location of various bulls as we ride out, then when we find ol' Papa Tomás, we'd sorter drift him over within bellerin' range of one of them, an' let nature take its course.

That stump-tailed ol' brindle sure did like

to fight, an' it soon got so he seemed to savvy what was up whenever we started driving him some place. He'd lumber along sorter rumbling in his throat and snuffing the ground, and every once in a while he'd stop, throw up his head and challenge the world with a beller that sounded like it would rip his whole goozlem out by the roots.

Somewhere way off acrost the hills some other ol' bull would hear the challenge and taunt him right back. Then ol' Papa Tomás would paw dirt up onto his back, horn the hell out of a cutbank to git his mad up, and head out to find his enemy and offer battle.

Once they come in sight of each other, me and Kitey would just circle wide and watch 'em, for they never did need no crowding. The way them two bulls would beller and snuff and pay and bow their necks and sidle around stiff-legged in preliminary maneuvering was purt near as fearful to watch as the fight itself. Generally most of the cattle in the neighborhood would come on the high trot to view the proceedings, the steers among 'em doing considerable long tongue snuffing and pawing their-ownselves—but mighty weak stuff compared to the bulls. Sometimes a young steer would git over-enthusiastic for his condition and bow up to one of the *toros* hisownself. If he actually got in the way, one of the bulls might chouse him with a brief snuff and threatening swing of horns, but otherwise they never paid him no attention.

Finally the two bulls would bow up practically shoulder to shoulder, their big ol' heads down and their eyes rolling as they slowly circled, watching for a chance to catch each other off guard. Suddenly one of 'em would lunge in to the attack. The other 'un's head would swing to meet it, and their boney ol' foreheads would crash together so hard that it jarred the earth. From then on it was push and shove and heave and strain, head to head, horn to horn, till the muscles knotted out all over 'em both like the bumps in an old cotton mattress.

It was now a test of push-power and endurance, for as soon as either bull begun to give way, the other 'un would lunge in all the harder, and once he got his adversary off balance, them ol' horns would dodge off the brow-to-brow contact and rip at his neck or his shoulder. The horns of them ol' longhorn bulls wasn't big ol' curving hat-racks like the steers wore. Thick and stout at the butt, most of 'em wasn't over a foot to two foot long with a deadly upward curve and polished points as sharp as a bodkin.

What made Papa Tomás a winner wasn't so much weight and power as it was fast foot-work, endurance, and the lightning speed with which he could seize the advantage and ram them fifteen-inch horns of his into another bull's side-meat or flank. Sometimes some ol' surly that outweighed him would push him all over the prairie, but Papa Tomás never lost his brow-to-brow contact nor his balance. Then, like as not just when it looked like the other bull was going to push him plumb to the ocean, ol' Papa Tomás would somehow throw him off balance and waste no time in rammin' him. After that, mighty few bulls ever managed to swing into a head-lock with him again. Mostly, when they felt them *saca tripas* horns of ol' Tomás' gouge in toward their innards, they knowed they was whipped, and with a big ol' windy snort, they would take out down the draw like hell sure 'nough had 'em. When they did that, you sure didn't want to git in their way, either afoot or ahorseback.

I'll admit that me and Kitey had found matching bullfights a mighty exciting pastime, and prob'ly had caused him to neglect his sparkin' more than he ort. But it seems that ain't the main bug in the syrup, anyhow.

"Oh, no, she ain't mad for the boolfights," says Kitey. "But when I ride on sight of the house, what you theenk? There wass the horse of Doff Wallace stooding by the door, and onder the shade from the beeg *álamo* they are sitting sides by sides, heem and Lorinda together! Thaas what makes me feel too bad, Papa Charley. I theenk maybe he wass making lofe to her!"

"Well, there wasn't nobody setting on your shirt tail, was there?" I says. "Whyn't you bow your neck like ol' Papa Tomás an' run him off?"

"Thass what I theenk myself at first! Then I say to me, '*Mira*, Cayetano, maybe she *like* thees *pelicano*. If those wass the case, what right you got to bost in and raising the hell? No, Cayetano,' I tell me, 'look like they don't saw you coming—more better you turn away an' come back when he has went. Then you ask the *señorita* very

polite wheech she like more better betwin them, thees *pelicano* cowsponch' or Cayetano Montoya?' "

"Well, did you ask her?"

"Thass the troubles. When I wait too long for heem to went, purty soon I get mad myself, and don't wait no more. He wass joost feexing to leave when I go there. 'Lorinda' I say, weethout getting off horse, 'take good look to thees man, take good look to me; wheech one you like for hosband?' For why that make her mad? 'Cayetano,' she say, 'don't be seelly!'

"But Doff, he joost laugh and get on the horse, don't even look at me like I wasn't there. 'Well, so long switheart!' he says. 'I'll be seein' you!'

" 'Whass your hurry, Meester Wallace?' she inquire from heem. 'Where you going so busy on Sunday?'

"But he joost t'row one kees with hees fangers an' ride away.

" '*Hija,*' I say, because I am older and more wise than she, 'I don't like that you make flirt with thees man!'

" 'For why?' she inquire. 'You theenk he is a cowthiff or sometheeng?'

"So when she put me by the arm an' take me in the house, I try to explain sometheeng to her; that if she lofe thees *pelicano,* hokay. But if she lofe me, then don't flirting with heem! But she change the subject. 'Cayetano,' she say, 'one of the *vecinos* bring me some flat biff yesterday. Do you theenk maybe it is some of our Espanish-American pipple that stealing the calves of the Fyling H?'

"So I ask her for why she don't ask that *pelicano,* Doff Wallace, he is the Depooty Shereef, ain't you? She say she did asked him and he theenk so, himself.

" 'Cayetano,' she tell me, 'instead of putting so much time to the boolfights, for why you don't find out who stealing the calves? I don't like for *Señor* Huffstedder to theenk *all* the Espanish people are thiefs!' "

"Well, Kitey," I says, "maybe the gal's right. Suppose you an' me keep our eyes open from now on out, an' see what we can find out?"

So we keep 'em open—and we see something nobody ain't never seen before. It's the bottoms of them post holes that the Ol' Man puts us to digging.

"*Mira,* Papa Jone," Kitey protests, "how you theenk we gonna ketch cowthiffs thees way? Deeg them up from the ground?"

"Never you mind about the cowthieves," says the Ol' Man. "I've turned Doff loose to do nothin' but ride. He'll ketch 'em! He's got several clues already."

But looks like Doff's spending a heap of this free time of his sparking Kitey's gal away from him, to where finally Kitey and Lorinda have a sure 'nough row about it.

"She say if I don't trust her now, thass bad sign that maybe I don't trust when married, nither," Kitey tells me. "So I tell heem if she don't quit makin' so much veesit with ol' Doff, maybe we don't *gonna* get married. To those she don't say notheeng. What you theenk she mean by those, Papa Charley?"

"Figgerin' out the women," I tells him, "is jest like diggin' post-holes; you never know when you're gonna hit gravel. Sometimes you can dig through it and sometimes you got to try diggin' some place else. Ain't there no other chicas on Sapo Crick?"

"Oh, sure," shrugs Kitey. "But thees the only one that make *brr-rromp-brr-roomp-brr-roomp* in my heart when I look at heem. It is for her I save the wages!"

As it turns out, he don't save them for long. One day we hear bullfight talk just over the rise from where we're post-holing. It sounds like Papa Tomás, and the temptation is more than we can stand. We throw down our tools, climb on our ponies and lope over there, aiming to watch 'em just a few minutes, then get back to work. But in that few minutes Doff Wallace and the Ol' Man come along and ketch us off the job, watching this bullfight. The Ol' Man don't waste no words.

"I warned you," he says, "an' I'm a man of my word. You're fired—both of you!"

That night he figgers up our time, we ketch up our private mounts, and the next morning finds us riding westward, on our way to Arizona. It's funny how the ranch a cowhand works on, even though he don't own as much as a cowtrack on it, gits to seeming like home. Even the bogholes make you homesick when you reflect how many ol' cows you have pulled out of 'em one time and another.

Of course it ain't as bad for me as for

Kitey. At least I ain't leaving no *querida* behind. I've tried to persuade Kitey that there ain't no sense in him hitting the long trail with me. He's got *gente* in the Rio Sapo settlements to stay with till he grabs another job within riding distance of his "switheart." He's young and he's a first-class cowhand.

"You can git you a ridin' job somewheres right here in the county," I urge him. "An' I'll betcha in a month the Ol' Man will be beggin' you to come back."

"Pooh-pooh for that!" he shrugs. "You go to Arizona—I'm go weeth you!"

"At least," I says, "we'd better ride by Sapo Crick so you can patch it up with Lorinda before you go—an' tell her a decent goodbye."

I can see by the anxious, puppy-dog look on his fine thin face that he sure would like to. But he's got his neck bowed because his *chica* has been letting ol' Doff come to see her and he shakes his head. "No, Papa Charley," he says.

The reason I'm heading for Arizona my own self is just a matter of plain ol' pride. If I stay around here, folks are going to be asking me how come I ain't riding for the Flying H no more, and I'll have to admit I been fired. Besides, as long as I'm in reach, like as not the Ol' Man will be wanting to hire me back one of these days, and dammiff I'll give him the satisfaction.

But neither one of us is feeling what you might call plumb happy that morning as we ride away acrost all this familiar Flying H range.

Then, lying under a juniper on Sabina Draw, we come onto ol' Papa Tomás. Quick as he sees us, dammiff that ol' bobtailed brindle don't get up and start pawing the earth. Then he starts making that low, rumbling *UH-uh-UH-uh-UH-uh* sound deep in his throat and heads out at a slow, lumbering gait down the draw. Just as much as to say, "Well, boys, if you know of any bulls that need whuppin' out this mornin', take me to 'em!"

I look at Kitey and he looks at me, and a slow grin begins to show them white teeth of his.

"Poor Papa Tomás want to make some boolsfight," he say. "She want us to find him one!"

"It'd be a shame to disappoint the critter," I says. "You reckon that ol' yaller lineback is still rangin' over towards the Amargoso—the one the Ol' Man was braggin' on?"

"Thass about seex mile on the wrong directions," shrugs Kitey. "You theenk we got time to do thees?"

"Our time's our own, ain't it?"

Without saying no more, Kitey cuts in easy ahead of Papa Tomás and points him towards the usual range of the big yaller lineback.

Amargoso means "bitter," and although there's a number of purty fair grass pockets along the bottom of the cliff-boxed Amargoso Creek, the cattle practically don't never use on them because the water of the crick is too alkali for their taste. But just a couple of miles east of it, there's sweet water springs in the midst of low, rolling hills and grassy flats. That's where we expect to find this lineback bull, but somehow we don't come on to him—nor no other cattle to speak of, though there's plenty of sign.

It sure is a disappointment to us not to git to match just one more bullfight for ol' Papa Tomás before leaving this range, but after drifting him around for an hour or two without hearing no answer to his challenge, we decide to give it up and git on our way.

Looking back from the top of a little ridge we see Papa Tomás horning the hell out of a scrub juniper. Kitey turns in his saddle to wave back at him just like he was somebody.

"*Adiós,* Papa Tomás!" he hollers in fond farewell.

"Don't let nobody git the downhill pooshes on you!"

Just then Papa Tomás throws up his head and begins to beller out them high, squeaky, squawky, rusty-saw noises that bulls use for a long distance love call—or challenge—depending on who hears it.

"Leesten!" exclaims Kitey, about ten seconds after he finishes his spasm.

Sure enough, apparently echoing up from the depths of Amargoso Canyon way yonder to the west, there comes the faint and distant answer of another bull. Papa Tomás hears it, too. He stiffens all over, paws fresh dirt onto his back, snuffs wind through his

nostrils and starts lumbering off in that direction.

"Ah, qué suave!" grins Kitey, as he reins around to follow him. "Joost one more boolsfight, before we *vamos, eh?"*

"Sounds like he's down in the Amargoso, somewheres around the Vega Escondida," I says. "What the hell you reckon cattle is doing down there?"

We soon find out. From the rim of Amargoso Canyon we ketch a glimpse of cattle down in the Hidden Meadow at the bottom, and yonder below where the canyon boxes in to the narrows, there is a curl of blue smoke drifting up through the green umbrella of a clump of cottonwoods.

Kitey don't say nothing, and neither do I, but both of us draw back into the junipers right quick, slip off our ponies and crawl back out to the edge for a better look. But the way them cliffs jut and curve, it's a hard canyon to look into. Except for a glimpse of an ol' yaller bull pawin' the earth, we can't see no more than we had at first. Meantime Papa Tomás seems to think he has found a way to git down there. It's a steep, narrow deer trail, and from the looks of it, if this bull makes it down there without slipping over a cliff and busting his neck, he'll be lucky.

As for us follering him with the horses, it just ain't fair to horse-flesh to risk it.

"Mira, Papa Charley," Kitey practically whispers, as if we might be heard plumb down in the canyon. "You see those reem of cliffers joost part way down there? Spozzin' we leave the horses, we crawl down there, an' watch those boolsfight joost like from grandstand, eh?"

"It ain't the bullfight I'm so much interested in, now," I says. "What I want to know is who's got a fire down there under them cottonwoods—an' what for? You reckon it's somebody hair-brandin' the Ol' Man's calves?"

"What we care for the calfs of Papa Jone?" Kitey shrugs. But he also gives me a wink. *"Mira!* From those cliffers reem, we see the whole *vega*—then if somebody come out making monkeys-beezness weeth that cattle, maybe we gonna see what he look like, eh? Then from Arizoona we write Papa Jone a letter. 'Dear Sir: The rostlers that slippering your calfs, she's a short tall man weeth small beeg *sombrero* riding one black sorrel horse.' Then he can feeger out who ees it, eh?"

It ain't easy rock-squirreling our way down to that lookout rim and by the time we make it, ol' Papa Tomás is already down in the meadow, bowing up to this big lineback bull.

"Look at that Papa Tomás!" whispers Kitey. "She's sure one esmart bool! Don't gonna locked horns unteel he got a down-heel poosh!"

The yaller bull is considerably bigger than Papa Tomás, and you can see that he knows it. As they bow up purt near shoulder to shoulder, it is plain that he aims to close for battle right quick, without no foolishness. But Papa Tomás is wary and keeps on circling him. Suddenly ol' Lineback makes a lunge to ketch the brindle in the shoulder, but the battle-scarred head of Papa Tomás swings to meet him, and the crash of them horn roots together sounds like a freight train hittin' a brick wall.

For the next few seconds it is a head-to-head deadlock, then gradually the big lineback begins to push Papa Tomás back.

"Cuidado! Papa Tomás!" whispers Kitey hoarsely. "Don't let him poosh you against the cliffers!"

Just then a man on horseback rides into the meadow from the cottonwood clump.

Evidently this feller don't spy us. His eye-search seems to satisfy him, for he lets down his rope, lopes into the meadow and swings his loop at a calf. He has just got it roped and is starting to drag it down to them cottonwoods where he's evidently got a hot iron waiting, when that bullfight busts wide open. Pushed purt near back against the cliff, Papa Tomás pulls his usual fast one by seeming to give way, then suddenly side-stepping and lunging in at the yaller bull's flank with them sharp, up-curving, *saca tripas* horns of his.

WITH a big whoosh of wind, the big lineback goes down with the hide ripped off about two feet of ribs. Yet somehow he manages to roll from under before Papa Tomás can plunge them horns plumb into his guts, and scramble to his feet. With a blatt like a stuck calf he turns tail and starts getting out of there—fast.

Like I said before, when a whupped bull starts leaving, it don't matter to him what's

in his way. He hits this cowboy's rope so hard that it jerks the calf through the air like the popper on a whip. And that ain't all. It also jerks the horse down, and throws the bull hisownself. When he gits up, behind him there's Papa Tomás ramming a horn in his rump, and in front of him there's this cowboy just scrambling out from under his down horse, right smack in his road.

If this cowboy had used his head he might have dodged the bull even then, but evidently the fall had sorta dazed him, and instead of dodging he takes out for the nearest tree.

Whether the ol' yaller bull was goin' his way anyhow, or whether he figgered here was something he *could* whip, so he'd better chase it, I don't know. Anyhow he puts this feller up a tree in jig time—then never even pausing, keeps right on down the canyon into the narrows like the heel flies had him—though by now Papa Tomás has given up trying to ketch him again anyhow.

I'd been so busy viewing all these goings on that I ain't even noticed that Kitey has slipped away from me and somehow climbed on down the cliff, until I see him sprinting across the meadow. This treed buckaroo quits his perch when he sees Kitey coming and tries to git to his horse, but my *vaquero compadre* quarters in on him like a coyote onto a jackrabbit, makes a wondrous long flying tackle and downs him.

When I finally git down there, Kitey has done got him gentled. In the meadow there's at least two freshly hair-branded Flying H calves—and maybe more.

"Well, Doff," I inquires, sociable like, "how's the clue business now?"

He don't answer, nor even look at me. Instead he's staring at three horsebackers riding acrost the meadow towards us from the up-canyon narrows. One of 'em is a Flying H cowboy named Fred, another is a stoopy looking old coot in Ol' Man Huffstedder's slouch hat, and the third is a slim, dark gal in bib overalls.

"What's goin' on here?" inquires the Ol' Man purty gruff as he rides up. "We thought we heard a bull fight goin' on!"

"Sure Mike, Papa Jone!" shrugs Kitey. "As far as that concerns, if Papa Tomás didn't lead us here, we don't ketch the cowthiff!"

"Cowthief?" The Ol' Man looks like he just cain't believe it. "Doff?"

Doff Wallace has always been mighty bold and brash heretofore, but now he won't even raise his eyes to the Ol' Man to face him.

"So what?" he growls.

But it's Lorinda that Kitey is concerned about.

"*Hija,*" he says gently, drawing himself up straight to face her. "I got very sorry we ketch thees *pelicano* on hees monkeysbeezness. If he ees your switheart, I don't like that he go to jail—but—"

"Sweetheart hell!" busts in Doff Wallace bitterly. "All that dam' gal's been doin' with me all this time is trying to pump me!"

"Pomp?" Kitey looks puzzled. "What mean thees word 'pomp'?"

"It means," says the Ol' Man dryly, "that she's the only one amongst us with sense enough to suspect this tin-badge deputy sheriff of bein' a cowthief. She's been lettin' him hang around jest a-purpose to see what she could find out. In fact that's how come her riding out with me today—ain't it Lorinda?"

Instead of answering him she bats her purty dark eyes at Kitey, yet tries to sound severe:

"Cayetano Montoya!" she says. "Is true you ron away to Arizona weethout even telling me goodbye?"

But Kitey knows how to bat his eyes too.

"Arizoona?" he bigs 'em up as if he'd never even heard of the place and takes her hand. "Wheechaway are those?"

I'm always ready to back up a *compadre* in a lie if he needs me.

"Listen to me, gal," I says. "I tried my best to persuade Kitey to go to Arizona with me, but 'hell no!' he says. 'You think I would leave the gal I love!'"

"Speakin' of love," busts in the Ol' Man, hiding a grin with his gruffness. "I'd love to have you git your horse and chouse these cattle outa here before they alkali themselves on this Amargoso water! Hurry it up, Charley!" He takes a chaw and winks. "Then if Kitey and Fred and Lorinda will take charge of draggin' this egg-suckin' deputy back to his sheriff, maybe you an' me might have time to hustle around an' match us a bullfight!"

PLANE FACTS

by Jim Irving

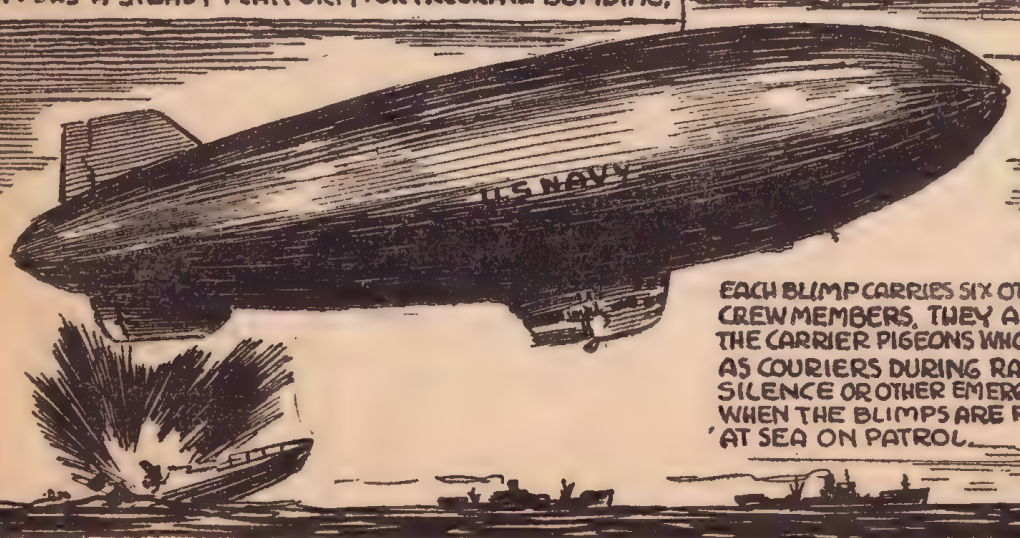
THE NEMESIS OF THE SUBMARINE

THE ABILITY TO NAVIGATE SLOWLY ALLOW THE NAVY BLIMPS TO KEEP PACE WITH SLOW MOVING CONVOYS, AND THEIR LONG CRUISING RANGE, 1,500 MILES, ENABLES THEM TO PATROL GREAT STRETCHES OF THE SEA. BLIMPS HOVERING OVER A BIG CONVOY HAVE FRIGHTENED AWAY MANY NAZI SUBMARINE PACKS. NAVY BLIMPS HAVE EVEN SHOT IT OUT WITH SUBS IN SEA BATTLES.

CARRYING A CREW OF EIGHT AND CAPABLE OF A TOP SPEED OF 90 MILES PER HOUR, A BLIMP IS EQUIPPED TO CARRY A HEAVY LOAD OF DEPTH BOMBS AND ARMAMENT. AT HOME IN ANY SORT OF WEATHER, THE HIGHLY MANEUVERABLE BLIMP OFFERS A STEADY PLATFORM FOR ACCURATE BOMBING.

M-1.

THE NAVY'S NEWEST BLIMP, THE M-1 IS THE WORLD'S LARGEST NON-RIGID AIRSHIP. NOW GOING INTO SERVICE, THE M-1 CARRIES A BIG LOAD OF BAD NEWS FOR NAZI SUBS.



EACH BLIMP CARRIES SIX OTHER CREW MEMBERS. THEY ARE THE CARRIER PIGEONS WHO ACT AS COURIERS DURING RADIO SILENCE OR OTHER EMERGENCY WHEN THE BLIMPS ARE FAR AT SEA ON PATROL.

DIAMOND DOUBLE CROSS

BY WILLIAM HEUMAN

Author of "Captain Caution," etc.

These Days No Ball Player Is a Has-Been Until He's Flopped a Wartime League Comeback

YOU could feel the heat beating down on all sides, reflecting on the hard-packed dirt of the infield, shrinking a man into insignificance. On the flagpoles rimming the grandstand the pennants drooped, scarcely ruffled by the breeze even at that height.

Duke Malloy, Gray second baseman, chewed on a pebble and moved two steps closer to the sack. These were the dog days of August with a pennant hanging on a single pitch, or a miscue in the infield.

"Give it to me," Red Feeney, Gray catcher, growled through the bars of the mask.

The Duke could see the Cougar batsman through the heat devils dancing across the infield. The Cougar, Johnny McCord, hit from the right side, wielding a long yellow bat, and McCord was a dead left field hitter—along the line.

Duke Malloy spat out the pebble and straightened up for a moment, relieving the strain on the legs. When you're thirty-nine, and you've been in organized baseball half of your life, you begin to feel it in the late innings. There's a tiredness in the legs and you can't wait till you get back to the cool dugout and drop on the bench.

He shifted two steps again, deeper back on the grass, closer to the sack. You could tell a dead left field hitter when you saw one, and he'd only seen McCord bat once. You could see it in the way they swung the bat or shifted their feet; maybe a lot of it was instinct — the thing you picked up watching men step into the rectangle for nineteen years; you knew in what direction they'd hit at least three times in five.

"Make him hit," Frenchy Ledeaux yelled from third base, and the Duke's gray eyes shifted across the field as pitcher, Pat Harrigan waited for his signal. Ledeaux, a veteran of ten years with the Grays, and a member of the old club when the Duke had been the leading batsman in the circuit, was playing his usual position for a right handed hitter—about ten feet off the third base sack, and the normal depth.

The Duke slapped his glove mechanically and stooped down again, hands resting on knees. He was a big man—still well over two hundred pounds, heavy jaw thrust out in the same pugnacious way. To the eighteen thousand, half-filling the Gray stands on this hot August afternoon, he looked the same as he did when he copped the league batting championship with a cool .408, and led these same Grays to a pennant and a world's championship. That was twelve years back.

Pat Harrigan got his signal and took the stretch, left foot braced against the rubber, facing first base and the Cougar runner stationed there. Harrigan threw from the left side, a tall rangy man with sand-colored hair and pale blue eyes, eighteen wins for the Grays and three weeks to go before the season was over.

Harrigan's first pitch was wide for a ball. McCord stepped out of the rectangle and Duke Malloy straightened up again, walking back on the grass and staring at the big scoreboard in right field. It was 1 to 0 for the Grays at the start of the seventh, one runner on first base, one away, and the Cougars in second place snapping at the heels of the league-leading Grays.

THE Duke picked up a blade of grass and stuck it in his mouth. Gray Field hadn't changed in the seven years he'd been away—seven years after the ancient Jack McKee, Gray owner, had kicked him out, and he'd played through the seasons in seven different leagues—even a hitch in Mexico on one occasion.

"I gave you a ball club," McKee had howled at him. "You threw it away, Malloy."

"Like hell," the Duke growled back. "I gave you your only world's championship, Mac." He had a comeback for everything in those days; he nagged at the players when they didn't seem to be going all-out; he'd had a fight under the grandstand with his own catcher, Red Feeney, and the squat, bow-legged man with the broken nose hadn't forgotten it even today.

"What kind of a manager is it," McKee had raved, "who goes up into the stands after a fan? Is that an example to your players?"

"The guy called me a 'fathead'," the Duke grinned. "I don't take that, Mac." The Grays were in last place then, and the Duke was hitting .245, the sports writers claiming he was washed up—at thirty-two!

"You can take something else," Jack McKee scowled. "You can take your contract, Malloy, and tear it up. I'll pay you off."

HE'D been traded to the Steers before the season was over, and he'd started to hit when he got into another fight with Buck Sanders, likeable Steer first baseman. The Steers put him on the block and nobody bit. He went to the American Association, taking Leah and the two kids with him. They were very young then, and Leah had been afraid.

She stuck with him all the way, drifting from club to club all over the country. She was one in a million and the Duke knew it—knew it now a year after she was dead and he had the two boys on his hands.

"I'll take care of them," the Duke had promised. "I'll send them to the best schools." He didn't know with what because he was only making a hundred and fifty a month, and board, in the Southwest League. It was a comedown from the twenty grand he'd received with the Grays in the old days—top dough which had gone over the hill to the race track and gambling houses.

Benny Thomas, Gray scout, picked him up playing with the Mustangs in San Pedro, still hitting the ball, but with his legs going fast. Always, it was the legs. He had a big frame, and the underpinning had to take plenty of punishment.

"We got a couple of the old guys with us," Thomas had explained, "and a lot of kids comin' up. Everybody's 4-F, or over thirty-eight in this man's league. Uncle Sam has the rest of 'em."

"You want me, Benny?" the Duke had asked, incredulous. Years back he'd given up hope of returning to the big time. He'd gone out in disgrace, with the Gray fans on

his neck and Jack McKee consigning him to a hot hell.

"Anybody can swing a bat," Thomas murmured, "and is over the draft age, we want."

Duke Malloy watched Pat Harrigan stepping up to the rubber again. He'd been back three weeks with the Grays, filling in at second after Eddie Townsend got his call from the army. He was holding up, and hitting over .300, but the fans remembered him; they wanted to see him come up into the stands again.

Red was calling for a hook to McCord—a hook which cut in toward the Cougar batsman's stick. Duke Malloy moistened his lips and glanced again toward Ledeaux at third base. Ledeaux should have been deeper and closer to the sack for a boy like McCord, and Ledeaux knew it; Red Feeney was a smart enough catcher to know that a batter like McCord loved those incoming hooks from a left hander. Still Feeney called the pitch and Harrigan—a smart pitcher—was throwing it!

Harrigan's hook came in on McCord's bat, breaking exactly where the Cougar wanted it. McCord cut, swinging his body toward third base as he did so. The ball leveled off down the third base line, passing over the sack not more than ten inches from the ground, and bouncing on the left side of the white stripe. Foul ball.

Duke Malloy glanced toward the Gray bench where Sam Wade, manager, was sitting by the water cooler. Wade had been the shortstop on that crack outfit which the Duke had managed in the old days. He'd been very smart, and it didn't seem possible that he wasn't aware of what was going on under his nose.

Ledeaux should have been playing the batsman differently; Feeney never should be calling that kind of pitch to a batter who loved close balls. The Grays had a one run lead against the second place club and they needed this game—badly. A Cougar win today would put them a single game behind the leaders.

Frenchy Ledeaux came in with the ball to the box and said a few words to Harrigan. He walked back and the Duke watched him coldly. He'd never had any use for the classy Canuck third baseman even in the old days. Ledeaux, big for a Frenchman, sallow-faced, grinning white teeth, smiled at everybody; he had a good word for everybody, but he didn't mean it.

"Throw it here," Feeney yelled. "Talk it up, gang."

THE two kids in the Gray infield, young Lew Maxwell at short, and Harry Bixby at first, let out a few shouts and then quieted down again. They weren't sure any more. Maxwell was about nineteen, and Bixby, a 4-F, about twenty-two. They were very young for a pennant-bound crew, and it was hot.

Feeney was signalling for that same hook. The Duke tightened his lips and made a move to go into the box, but changed his mind. Jack McKee had talked to him before the first game he played with the Grays.

"We want you back, Duke," the old man snapped, "but we don't want your mouth. You play ball for us and you'll get paid big league money. Stay out of trouble."

The Duke smiled coldly. Maybe McKee didn't know what was going on out on the diamond these afternoons. There had been other cases where the Duke would have liked to question Red Feeney's judgment in handling the Gray pitching staff—good kids, but inexperienced. Feeney called for the wrong pitch—to the enemy batter's strength instead of his weakness. Twice the Grays had lost on one hit.

Harrigan took his stretch and curved the hook in toward McCord's bat. The Cougar hammered it on the ground toward third base. It was down the line, and if Ledeaux had been stationed in the right position, the ball would have been an easy out—possibly a double play.

The Frenchman got over very fast to knock down the ball. It was an incredulous stop—the kind only Ledeaux could have made because he was the class of the league at the hot corner.

The Duke skipped over to cover the second sack, not expecting Ledeaux to make a play there. The Canuck scooped up the ball and whistled it to second in an attempt to force the Cougar runner. They didn't throw any harder than Ledeaux and he would have had the force play if the throw hadn't pulled the Duke off the bag. Both runners were safe.

Duke Malloy walked in and tossed the ball to Harrigan. The pitcher's face was

expressionless. Red Feeney was standing with his mask under his arm, disgust plainly written on his wide, sweat-streaked face.

Ledeaux kicked the third sack—an expression of juvenile dissatisfaction which was very patent. The crowd gave Ledeaux a great hand for his "try."

The Cougars had Tommy Barton, clean-up man, in the slot with one away and runners on first and second.

"Okay," the Duke muttered to himself. "Throw it away, Harrigan."

Pat Harrigan threw one ball—waist high. Barton, hitting from the left side, swiped it over the right field wall for a home run, scoring the two runners ahead of him, and giving the Cougars a 3 to 1 lead.

When the disappointed Gray crowd sat down the bases were cleared. Harrigan settled down and fanned Kenlon, the left fielder, retiring the side when Blackburn whipped a hot grounder down at the Duke close to the keystone sack.

Duke Malloy was playing deep for the heavy-hitting Blackburn. He had time to get over for the ball and make the put-out.

On the way to the dugout, first baseman Bixby slapped the Duke's shoulder as he went by.

"Nice going, Duke," the kid grinned. He was a big boy—blond, wavy-haired, blue eyes, ulcer 4-F.

Duke Malloy looked at him and nodded. These kids had heard of him years back when they were playing stick ball in the streets. They remembered his .408 batting average, and the thirty home runs per year he'd hammered out five summers in succession; they remembered his fights with the Gray players, the fans, McKee himself.

In the dugout Sam Wade said, "Tired, Duke?"

"You should be out there, Sam," the Duke retorted, and was rewarded with a grin. They were the same age, but Wade was making four times his dough and sure of his job. He was up on trial, fighting to hold on now and maybe grab a World Series' cut for his two kids.

The Grays went down in order the end of the seventh with Wade out on the coaching line clapping his hands and asking for hits. The Duke sat by the water cooler, mopping the perspiration from his leather-colored face. It had been hot in San Pedro and he was used to it, but he was also thirty-nine.

THE end of the eighth the Grays got a man around to third base, but Feeney went down swinging for the third out, hurling his bat toward the dugout in disgust when he was finished.

The Duke looked at the bat, looked at Feeney and walked away, a slow grin around the corners of his mouth. They were putting on a good act—Ledeaux, Feeney and Harrigan, and it looked all right to the crowd. Down on the field you could see more; you could see Feeney cutting under a shoulder high ball and missing it by inches. In the old days the Duke remembered that the Gray catcher used to murder a shoulder high ball; that he'd wait for such a pitch, even taking two strikes on occasions.

Feeney saw that grin and looked at him queerly. Passing Ledeaux on the way to second base, the Duke kicked up a little dust over the Frenchman's spike shoes.

"Get 'em, Frenchy," he murmured.

Ledeaux grinned and glanced swiftly toward Feeney. The Duke walked past, out to his position. He watched Harrigan taking his throws. The tall left hander had settled down after the one disastrous inning, but the damage was done.

They came in for the end of the ninth, trailing by two runs. Sam Wade sent in a pinch hitter for Harrigan, leading off. The Gray batter popped up for the first out.

Logan, veteran Gray center fielder, singled to right field for a life. Logan was another old-timer from the great Gray championship club, recalled by the management. Logan, short, heavy-legged, streaks of gray in his black hair, was about thirty-seven, and playing good ball!

Duke Malloy picked out his stick, a long black club, and ambled out to the waiting circle. Georgie Pitts, Gray left fielder, was in the batting box, very anxious to hit.

A fan behind the catcher started to yell as the Duke crouched down with the bat boy.

"Hey, Bull-Head," the fan roared. "How they runnin' down at Hileah?"

Duke Malloy reddened behind the ears but didn't look over.

"Don't mind those bums," the kid bat boy scowled. "They don't know anything, Duke."

The Duke glanced at the boy. He was about fourteen, two years older than his oldest kid, Harvey. Both boys were at a private school where they could be taken care of while the Duke traveled around the country with the Grays. It cost dough, but there was no alternative. If he could stay with the Grays he could pay it. If Sam Wade sent him back to San Pedro—

Pitts took a called strike and then shot one over second base for another single. Logan held second, not risking the throw-in.

The Duke threw away one bat and stepped into the rectangle. The Cougars had Lefty Carr on the mound, and the big left-hander had been handing out goose-eggs since the first inning.

But Stanley, Cougar backstopper, walked out to the mound to confer with Carr. The Cougars realized they were on the spot, but a double play would give them the game. The Duke was notoriously slow, but he hit a very long ball.

Stanley came back, the mask under his arm. He grinned at the Duke.

"Take your three cuts, grandpa," he chuckled, "and then sit down."

"Don't feed me low balls," the Duke murmured. "I murder 'em." He knew they planned to keep it down around the knees and make him hit into the dirt.

Lefty Carr threw one wide and the Duke let it go by contemptuously. He was past the age where he bit at the bad ones. They'd have to throw to him if they wanted to get him out.

HE STEPPED out of the batter's box, kicked at his spikes with the bat, and glanced toward the dugout. Ledeaux and Feeney were sitting together, watching him grimly. The Duke smiled coldly. Left handers had always been duck soup for him, and if anything, he liked those low balls, a little below the waist. If Carr fed him one—

The second pitch was across the knees, but good. They shot up a one beneath the "strike" sign on the scoreboard.

"This guy can't get down for those low ones," Stanley yelped through the bars of the mask. "I can hear his joints creak!"

Sam Wade cupped his hands and called something to the Duke, but the words couldn't be heard in the noise. With one away in the ninth, the crowd was standing up—some of them moving toward the exit gates. The Duke was a natural for a double play with that fast Cougar infield keyed up. Any kind of a ground ball could double him at first.

The third pitch was low again, but wide. It was two and one. Carr would have to put this pitch in. He had good control, but it wasn't perfect. Maybe he'd let this next low pitch come a bit higher—closer to the waist.

The Duke tensed himself, digging in with his spikes till his feet were firmly anchored. Gray eyes drifted toward the distant left field wall. In the old days he'd cleared the three hundred and thirty feet dozens of times. Since coming back with the Grays he was just meeting the ball, aiming at base hits and not distance, trying to keep his average up so Sam Wade would overlook the slowness of foot.

Carr took the stretch, left hand sweeping back. The ball came in fast and true. Undoubtedly, the Cougar southpaw had aimed for the knees again, but put it higher than that.

Duke Malloy crouched and swept the bat around in a perfect arc. They used to talk about his batting form in the old days; he had been a model for the kids coming up.

Ball met bat directly over the center of the plate, and the Duke followed through like a golfer, pulling it toward left field. It went up high and the crowd thought it was an out to the Cougar left fielder.

The Duke dropped the club and trotted down the line. He'd had the feel of that one and he could gauge the distance of the left field wall. The ball was going over—with plenty to spare.

He watched it land up in the bleacher seats behind the wall, far up near the back. As he rounded first base they gave him a hand. Logan and Pitts crossed the platter, and the Duke followed them with the winning run. He saw Lefty Carr walking stolidly toward the dugout, stuffing his glove in his back pocket. In the old days he would have given the beaten pitcher the razzberries; now he actually felt sorry for the guy. He was an older man—an older and a wiser man.

Walking down the ramp toward the dressing rooms with Logan, he voiced something which had been on his mind for a long time. They could still hear the noise from the field

as the jubilant Gray fans swarmed over the railings.

"I must have been pretty much of a louse, Ken," he stated.

Ken Logan grinned. "We had a tough crew in those days, kid," he chuckled. "The game's changed a lot, Duke. Every guy had his spikes sharpened years ago, and they were gunning for you."

"Maybe they had a reason," the Duke said. He saw Ledeaux, Feeney and Harrigan walking up ahead of them. Feeney was saying something to the Canuck, but they couldn't catch the words. Ledeaux was shaking his head.

Sam Wade passed by and touched the Duke's arm. "Nice going, Duke," he said, and that was all.

Duke Malloy's lips tightened. He spoke to Ken Logan out of the corner of his mouth.

"Look, Ken," he murmured. "Why should anybody want to throw away a pennant and Series' dough?"

Logan was silent for a moment. "They'd be cracked," he muttered, "unless they were picking up more than they'd make in the Series."

"You know Johnny McCord pretty well?" the Duke went on slowly.

"Played against him all season," Logan said. "Maybe seventeen games now."

"What does he like?" the Duke asked. "You can see pretty good from center field."

Logan hesitated. "He kills close balls, Duke," was the reply.

"Red Feeney know that?" the Duke went on.

"Feeney's one of the smartest catchers in the league," Logan said. "He'd catch that quicker than I would."

"Why does Feeney ask for two hooks in succession," the Duke murmured, "in on the handle to a dead left field hitter like Johnny McCord?" He paused, "When a hit might mean the ball game?"

Logan tugged at his cap. "I wouldn't know, Duke," he said quietly.

"You see it?" the Duke asked.

Logan hesitated. "It did look funny," he admitted. "McCord killed that first hook, but it went foul; he hit the other one pretty hard, but Ledeaux got over in time even if he did miss the play at second."

"There can be hell to pay," the Duke said flatly, "if a catcher calls to a batter's strength instead of his weakness—especially with this young staff we got here. They wouldn't know enough to shake off a signal."

"Harrigan could have called for another pitch," Logan said. "Why didn't he?"

"You ask him," the Duke grinned coldly.

THEY went into the dressing room. Ledeaux was standing by his locker drinking a bottle of beer, dark hair clinging to his skull. He waved to the Duke and pointed to a bottle.

Duke Malloy shook his head and passed on to his own locker. After the crash came and he'd been shipped out he'd started to hit the bottle heavier than was good for him. Leah had had to straighten him out on that score. He couldn't take any chances now.

They had the Cougars again the next afternoon, fourth game of the four game series. The Grays had taken two out of the three and now held a two game advantage.

Sam Wade started the slim right hander Jesse Redfern. The Gray chucker was another kid like Maxwell at short, but he'd been showing plenty of stuff with a dozen wins and four losses for the season.

Watching him warm up outside the dugout, Duke Malloy could see that the kid was nervous. Again it was terribly hot, the heat hanging like a pall over the field. The tough Cougars started to work on Redfern even before the game started.

Ken Logan nudged the Duke in the dugout. "A kid like that," Logan said quietly, "can go quick with one bad break. He's on edge."

The Duke nodded. He'd seen it happen before. Redfern could pitch shutout ball today, and he might go in the first inning if anything happened to upset him.

The kid got off to a good start. He had a sizzling fast ball for so slender a thrower, and his hook zipped as it cut the corners. For five innings the Cougars couldn't see him while the Grays sent two runners over the plate.

"Like yesterday," Logan murmured when they took the field for the start of the sixth, 2 to 0 in their favor.

Duke Malloy picked up a few practice rollers thrown over by young Bixby. He watched Frenchy Ledeaux at third base. If

anything should happen this afternoon, it might well begin at the hot corner.

It was Johnny McCord who started the fireworks for the Cougars with a line drive single to center. The Duke watched the ball shoot over his head, a few feet beyond his reach.

Barton, the first baseman, dumped a bunt in front of the plate and the fiery Red Feeney shot out after it, waving Redfern back. Feeney scooped up the ball and hurled it to first. His throw was a trifle wide, pulling Bixby off the sack. Both runners were safe.

The Duke watched Sam Wade in the dugout. These wide throws could cause a lot of damage if they were intentional, and on a play like that no one could decide whether it was a bad toss or a deliberate attempt to lose the runner.

Wade had his cap pulled down tight over his eyes and was staring across the infield. It was impossible to read Wade's mind.

ON THE mound Redfern was getting ready to crack wide open. The Duke could see it in the way the kid watched the two runners on the bases. Sam Wade waved to the bull pen pitchers and they got up to work.

Chuck Kenlon, Cougar outfielder, drew a free pass on four straight balls, filling the sacks. Wade called the infielders in for the play at home. On the right kind of a ground ball now they were sure to get two.

Redfern got two strikes on Blackburn, and then the Cougar siege gun rapped one down to third, along the line. Ledeaux was on top of it like a panther. Johnny McCord bolted for home, head down, knees pumping. Ledaux's throw to the plate caught him squarely in the back, the ball dropping to the ground. All runners were safe.

Duke Malloy kicked up a clump of dirt and stared at Ledeaux, hands on hips. The Canuck was again going through the motions of feigned disgust. It was apparently the worst kind of accident. Young Redfern should have had a double play on that ground ball and he would have been out of trouble with two away. Now the Cougars still had the sacks loaded, with none down and a run in.

The Duke walked into the mound. "Take it easy, kid," he murmured. "They only got one."

Redfern shook his head. His face was pale and there were lines around his mouth. Duke Malloy went back to his position, conscious of the fact that it was only a matter of time now. Redfern was through.

The kid managed to get Craig, the second sacker, on a pop to first base, but Stanley, the catcher, hammered a ball over the right field fence, sending three men home before him. It was the ball game. 5 to 3 at the finish.

"We still got a one game lead," Ken Logan scowled in the dressing room.

"It should be three," the Duke said aloud, "if a couple of guys hadn't started throwing the ball around." His voice carried down to Ledeaux and Feeney half a dozen yards away. Ledaux had a bottle of beer tipped to his lips. It came down suddenly. The Canuck glanced at Feeney.

The red-headed catcher came over slowly. "Did I hear that straight, Duke?" he grated.

"You got ears," Duke Malloy told him thinly, "and they're plenty big."

Feeney stopped a few feet away. He was the shorter man, but nearly as heavy, several years younger.

"Look," the Gray catcher snarled, "you came back here, Malloy, because this team was shot to pieces by the draft. You're playin' ball with the Grays when you're not good enough for a Class B club."

"Let Wade worry about that," the Duke murmured. He remembered the knock-down and drag-out affair he'd had with this same man years back. They would still have been at it if ten of the Grays hadn't broken it up.

The other Gray players were coming up, staring curiously. The door opened at the far end of the locker room and a pot-bellied man came in, a grin on his sallow-face. He wore a loud shirt, cigarette dangling from puffy lips.

"Easy," Ken Logan said softly. "Here's that snipe, Shane. He eats this kind of stuff up."

Duke Malloy glanced over Logan's shoulder at the little sports reporter. He'd known Shane in the old days when the man had been a cub reporter, filling in space for better men. Shane hadn't been so fat then, but he had the same air of self-assurance, that cockiness, combined with a sly, underhanded manner of unearthing the dirt.

"How's it, gang?" Shane greeted. The

Duke could read the man's small soul through his bleary green eyes. Shane suspected something—the kind of stuff he loved to print, a dressing room squabble.

The Duke stared at the man contemptuously. As a cub reporter he'd once picked up Shane bodily and dropped him into a sunken fish pool in the Plaza Hotel when the little rat refused to lay off him, pleading for the inside story of the quarrel between himself and Jack McKee. Shane had never forgotten the incident. Already, he'd made remarks about the Duke's past, snapping at old McKee for bringing back a notorious trouble-maker.

"Shall I bring out the boxing gloves?" Shane chuckled, "or are you boys going at it bare fists like the last time?"

"Beat it," Feeney growled. Turning his back on the Duke he walked to his locker.

The Duke sat down on the bench and slipped off his spikes. Shane stood nearby, puffing on the cigarette, leaning against the steel locker.

"Up to your old tricks, Duke?" he murmured.

"Any objections?" the big man asked.

"No," Shane said. "I like it. You punch some guy, Duke, and I got a story." He paused and leaned down. "I don't have any use for that redhead, Duke. What's it about? I'll put you in good."

"You want to know something?" the Duke asked quietly. He was holding his right spike shoe in his hand, fingers around the heel, leaning forward, elbows on knees.

"What is it?" Shane whispered, eyes lighting up with interest.

"Come a little closer," the Duke murmured. He noticed that Shane was wearing light summer shoes with canvas tops.

SHANE took another step closer. As he did so, Duke Malloy smashed the spike shoe over Shane's toes. The reporter yelled with the pain and leaped back, dancing around, tears of pain filling his eyes.

"Write that up," the Duke said with satisfaction. Picking up a towel he walked toward the shower room. The other Grays were grinning. All except Feeney, Ledeaux and Harrigan. They watched grimly from the other side of the room.

Coming out of the shower room ten minutes later, the Duke saw Sam Wade standing in the doorway of his office. Silently, he hooked his finger at the big second baseman and then went back inside.

The Duke stared. No one in the room had seen the movement as Wade's office was situated at the end of one of the locker sections. Quickly, the Duke dressed and went into the office. Wade was still in uniform, his face tight.

"Sit down, Duke," the Gray manager said, after closing the door behind him.

"What's up?" Duke Malloy asked.

Wade took off his cap and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. The office was very hot, practically no breeze coming through the open window which looked out across Gray Field.

"You're smarter than the rest of these guys, Duke," Wade said flatly. "You know more baseball than all those kids put together."

"Thanks," the Duke said. He waited for the rest, knowing all the time that some of the things going on had not entirely escaped Wade's notice.

"Two plays broke up this ball game today," Wade mumbled. "You saw them, Duke. What do you think?"

Duke Malloy grinned. "You mean Feeney's throw to first, and Ledeaux's peg into McCord's back?"

Sam Wade laughed coldly. "And Harrigan's throwing to McCord's strength yesterday; Ledeaux playing way out of position when he should know better."

"What do they add up to?" the Duke asked softly.

Wade hesitated. "I wanted to make sure you were aware of them," he said at last, "and that I wasn't imagining things."

Duke Malloy eased his frame into a round-backed chair near the window.

"You're not imagining anything, Sam," he said quietly. "Feeney, Ledeaux and Harrigan are playing their own game; they're not working for the Grays." He paused. "Why, Sam?"

The Gray manager rubbed his jaw. "Maybe I know something," he mumbled, "and maybe I don't. There are so many rumors." He stared at the second baseman for a full ten seconds. "Jack McKee is selling out if the Grays don't win the pennant."

"Selling out?" the Duke gulped. "But even second place is good money, and the

Grays are a top club in the league. They'll be worth plenty next season."

"Don't I know it," Wade growled. "But old Mac has his mind made up. He hasn't had a winner since you took us in, Duke, and he's getting a little disgusted. It's been around that he'll throw up if the Grays lose the pennant."

"Where does that put Feeney and Ledeaux?" Duke Malloy asked. "They're not buying?"

"No," Wade agreed. "Jack McKee has had a few offers already. The highest bid came from Sam Borden."

"Borden?" the Duke muttered. "The gambler!" He remembered Sam Borden from the old days at the race track. Borden was a plunger and not too straight if he could find an angle.

"Borden and Feeney were pretty good friends one time," Wade was saying. "Does it make any sense now, Duke?"

"It's measuring up," the Duke growled. "If they're working together and the Grays lose out, Borden picks up a good buy." He paused. "Feeney always wanted to run this club; he'll be in for a good job. Ledeaux and Harrigan maybe get their salaries doubled for their efforts."

"That's how I figured it," Wade admitted. "But where's the proof? Who can decide when an error is deliberate?"

"You don't have to string along with those rats," the Duke told him. "If you're running the club you can fire them whenever you want to."

"It's not as easy as that," Wade explained. "This little monkey, Shane, is wise to the whole business. He knows Borden made an offer for the club and he has no use for me. He wants a story—a scoop, the dirtier the better."

"So if you trade Feeney, Ledeaux and Harrigan," the Duke murmured, "Shane will claim you're working with Borden to lose the pennant."

"You got it," Wade stated flatly. "Those three guys are supposed to be the backbone of this club, and they were all season till Borden came into the picture. I'll stake a year's salary that he bought them out."

Duke Malloy stared out the window. If Borden purchased the club and Feeney became manager it meant that he was through with the Grays, and he'd had hopes of sticking—maybe as coach next season or the season after. He'd be getting several times what he could get in the sticks.

"I want you to keep your eyes open, Duke," Wade was saying. "If you see or hear anything let me know. When I put these guys on the block I might need somebody to talk for me."

"You know how far my word goes around here," Duke Malloy muttered. "I'm like a guy on parole."

THE Cougars moved out the next afternoon and the Trojans, fourth place, came in. The Trojans didn't figure to be nearly as tough as the fast-moving Cougars. Sam Wade started Hal Sackett, the right hander, the first of the series. Sackett threw a tricky knuckler and had been around quite a while.

"We'll see what they can do today," Sam Wade whispered to the Duke before the game. They still had a full game lead on the Cougars, but the second place club was stacking up against the last place Lions, a five game series which they should sweep without any trouble.

Hackett got by for three innings. In the fourth the Trojans nicked him for a run. The Grays came back with three in the fifth, the Duke contributing a single with two aboard. Frenchy Ledeaux broke up the rally by missing third base, coming down from second on Bixby's screaming smash to left-center. The umpire ruled him out when the alert Trojan third baseman chased the Canuck into the dugout with the ball.

Sam Wade looked at Duke Malloy, his eyes bleak. Neither man said anything. In the stands it had looked like an accident. Ledeaux put up a big kick with the umpire and had the watch pulled on him.

"Get out on the field," Wade said at last. "Play ball."

In the seventh inning with the bases loaded for the Trojans and two away, Hackett threw in a knuckler, the ball breaking into the dirt. It got away from Feeney and rolled to the net, the runner from third coming in. The next batsman singled, and the Trojans held a 4 to 3 lead.

Red Feeney was as sore as a red hen when he came into the dugout.

"Those damn knucklers," the catcher growled.

Duke Malloy laughed out loud as he bent

over the water cooler. He sat down wearily, feeling the pain in the legs again. Feeney stood on the dugout steps, glared at him for a moment, and then sat down.

In the eighth with a Trojan runner on first base and one away, the next batsman slapped to deep short, Maxwell coming up with it prettily, and pegging to the Duke at second.

Duke Malloy pivoted and got the ball to first for the second out just as runner, Jake Hall, hit him squarely, knocking him into the dirt. Hall was a big man and he'd been coming fast from first. The Duke felt the pain in the legs; they were trembling when Hall helped him to his feet.

"You come right into me," Hall muttered. "I tried to cut away from you."

The Duke walked to the dugout, a little stiff in the knees. Six years back he'd broken that left leg just below the knee. It didn't help any to have it banged like that.

"How's it?" Sam Wade asked when he sat down.

"I'm all right," the Duke muttered. He was glad the game was nearly over because he wasn't sure he'd be able to finish out.

They lost to the Trojans by a 4 to 3 score, and the Cougars whipped the Lions putting them in a tie for first place. Duke Malloy sat in the dressing room a long time before going back to the hotel. On two flagrant plays, Ledeaux and Feeney had tossed away the ball game; they'd throw away more before the season was over and the Cougars would walk in.

It was nine o'clock that night when he came down from his room and crossed the lobby. He heard Frenchy Ledeaux's laugh from the barroom off the lobby, and he paused. He didn't see Shane slide in through the revolving door at the front.

Feeney was talking now, discussing the game with the bartender. "That damn knuckler," the red-headed catcher growled.

Duke Malloy thought of his wife, Leah; he thought of the two kids at the school, depending on him with his job slipping away. He walked steadily toward the barroom.

Feeney had his back toward him and a glass of beer in his hand.

"You stinker," the Duke growled. Swinging the catcher around, he knocked the beer glass from his hand and hit him on the jaw with his right fist. Feeney staggered back against the bar, mouth open in surprise, the fight in his pale blue eyes.

Shaking his head, he bounced away from the bar, coming in with a rush, swinging both fists. The Duke waited for him calmly, ramming home the punches, and taking a few in the face himself. He knocked Feeney down again, but the redhead came up, roaring.

THE house detective and the bartender managed to get in between them. People were crowding in from the lobby.

"Better come outside, Bud," the detective told the Duke. The Gray second baseman saw Shane grinning at him from the door as he passed by. He was still trembling with rage up in his room thirty minutes later, washing the blood from his face. One of Feeney's fists had opened a cut on his right cheek.

It was nearly midnight when Sam Wade came into the room and sat down wearily.

"I heard about the fight, kid," he murmured. "Glad you gave it to him, Duke."

"So what happens now?" Malloy gulped. "We just go on taking it?"

"No," Wade smiled. "It's all over, Duke."

"I don't get it," Duke Malloy muttered.

"I just traded Feeney, Ledeaux and Harrigan to the Jays," Wade said quietly. "Did the whole thing over long distance. I got four kids I've had my eye on for a long time."

Duke Malloy gulped. "What did McKee say?"

Wade grinned. "He blew up—went higher than a kite. If the Grays don't win the pennant he's kicking me out even before he quits himself."

"What made you do it?" the Duke asked curiously.

Sam Wade rubbed his chin. "I got to thinking of those kids playing their heads off every afternoon—kids like Maxwell, Bixby, Redfern. It wasn't fair, Duke."

Duke Malloy nodded. "You're out on a limb now, Sam," he pointed out. "Every newspaper man in the country will lay it into you for breaking up a pennant-bound club with the season almost over."

"I feel better about it," Wade smiled, "and we're not licked yet, Duke. I traded

the best third baseman and the best catcher in the league, along with a top-ranking pitcher, but they weren't playing ball for us."

"I want to see what Shane has to say about this tomorrow," the Duke observed. "He'll make something out of it."

It was a new game the next afternoon with a jeering crowd in the stands, booing Wade, booing Duke Malloy. Shane had gotten a new twist into his story. He claimed that there was dissension among the players, blaming the Duke, the old trouble-maker, for most of it, pointing to the fight the previous evening in the hotel bar.

"Wade," Shane stated, "for reasons known only to himself, has elected to toss away the pennant chances of the Grays by trading three of his veterans, and retaining the man who is causing the trouble."

Farther down in the column Shane gave an inkling as to the reason Wade was willing to lose a pennant, bringing in the gambler Borden, and Jack McKee's intention of selling out if the Grays lost. Very cleverly, Shane hinted at a liaison between Borden and Wade, yet not making it plain enough that a libel suit could be made out of it.

"He's plenty smart," Wade commented to the Duke. "He says so much and you're supposed to infer the rest."

They sat in the dugout as the Grays took the field for batting practice. When the Duke stepped up to the plate, a chorus of boos greeted him. He grinned and slapped out a few hits. The left leg was still plenty stiff and he knew he'd have to go easy on it for a couple of days.

THEY dropped a close game to the Trojans by a 5 to 4 score, the Cougars moving into first place. Going off the field, the Gray fans stood up and roared their disapproval.

Ledeaux and Feeney had been popular with the crowd while the Duke had never been a crowd-pleaser.

"Not so good," Wade said in the dressing room. "I hope these kids get straightened out, Duke."

"We got two weeks to go," Duke Malloy told him.

"And we face the Jays the last three games of the season," Wade said sourly. "Feeney and Ledeaux will break their backs to kick us out of the pennant, if we're still near the top."

Duke Malloy nodded. The Jays were sixth place in the league, but they'd be plenty tough with Feeney, Ledeaux and Harrigan bolstering the club.

Redfern won the next afternoon, shutting out the Trojans with three hits, and keeping pace with the Cougars. On Saturday the Duke stumbled going after a ground ball in his territory. The hit let in two Trojan runs and gave the visitor's the ball game.

A pop bottle flew from the upper tier as he came in to the dugout at the end of the inning. He sat down in a corner and watched the Gray kids. They looked at him curiously. Shane had been giving it to him since Feeney and his gang left, hinting that the Duke might have an interest in the Gray's losing instead of winning.

Duke Malloy rubbed his left knee, wondering how long it would hold up. Wade had no one to go in for him at this time.

"We need your stick," the Gray manager said. "Let me worry about the fielding."

They had four games with the Royals and they grabbed three of the four, still staying within one game of the league-leading Cougars. The Gray kids were fighting for every run, coming down the stretch.

Each night the Duke had the knee massaged and limped back to the hotel. It was becoming sheer agony trying to cover that vast territory around the keystone sack. Each afternoon the fans booed him as the hits slipped by through his spot. Each morning Shane needled him in the column.

Coming into the final week they trailed the Cougars by a game and a half with a double-header scheduled with the Bisons, and then the start of the three game series with the Jays.

Sam Wade shoved in Redfern and Sackett in the double-header, taking both ends while the Cougars were winning over the Lions. A single game separated the two clubs as the Grays came out onto the field for the first Jay encounter.

The Duke saw Ledeaux and Feeney in the opposite dugout as he came through the door to the field at one-thirty in the afternoon. A capacity crowd had turned out to witness the grudge game.

Duke Malloy took his hits and sat down as much as possible, resting his legs for the

real thing. He passed Red Feeney on one occasion as the new Jay catcher came out of his own dugout.

Feeney said it out of the corner of his mouth as he walked by:

"Don't block that sack today, rat."

The Duke whirled, but Ken Logan coming over fast, grabbed his arm and led him away.

"That louse," the Duke growled. "He don't pull any bluffs on me."

"Be careful," Logan advised. "They're gonna cut you up out there, Duke."

"I wear spikes myself," Duke Malloy said grimly.

When the bell clanged he went out with the others, a big man with a jutting jaw and steely gray eyes. The Gray fans cheered, but not for him. They were for the kids who were playing heads-up ball despite opposition from within.

The Jays started Harrigan on the mound and the left hander was in rare form, bearing down hard against his old teammates. The Jays picked up a run in the fifth on an error by Maxwell. It stood at 1 to 0 going into the seventh when Ledeaux singled with two away.

THE Duke watched the Frenchman leading off first, knowing what was going to happen. He could see it in Ledeaux's eyes as the Jay third baseman tugged at his cap.

With a one and one count on Meade, the Jay outfielder, Ledeaux darted for second. The throw from catcher, Allen, came down fast and true as the Duke waited behind the bag.

Ledeaux hit the dirt a good ten feet before the sack, spikes riding high, slashing at the Duke's left foot.

Duke Malloy took the ball, slid the left foot back, and then slammed the ball down into Ledeaux's midsection as he came by. The runner was out.

Frenchy Ledeaux walked across the field, right hand on his stomach, mouth open. The usual smile had left his swarthy face.

"They're gunning for you," Wade told the Duke in the dugout. "I want to see you finish this series, kid."

"I'll be in there," Duke Malloy promised, "if they have to roll me out." He led the inning off with a long smash between right and center field, groaning a little as he hobbled down the first base line. He went over second just as the Jay center fielder scooped up the ball.

Sam Wade, coaching on third base, was waving for him to come on down. The Duke saw Ledeaux squatting over the third sack, waiting for the throw from the outfield. The situation was reversed this time.

Grimly, the Duke pounded down toward the bag, hitting the dirt as Wade gave him the signal. He expected the next move. Ledeaux jumped up in the air as if trying to avoid the Duke's spikes which were far from him. Coming down, he landed on Duke Malloy's right calf, slicing through the sock and cutting the flesh.

The Gray second baseman winced and gritted his teeth. He saw the umpire waving him safe. Ledeaux walked away, a small grin on his face.

"How's it?" Wade asked.

"Okay," the Duke murmured. He had to go in on a roller to the infield on the very next play, with Red Feeney blocking home plate, standing a foot in front of the rubber.

Pain exploded through that bleeding right leg as he hobbled down the line, hitting Feeney squarely just as the redhead caught the ball. Feeney had the ball on him as they both toppled over the rubber. He was out. The Jays took the game by a 1 to 0 score, while the Cougars, surprisingly enough dropped a double header to the Lions.

In the dressing room Duke Malloy listened to the noise as the news came through that the Cougars had lost two.

"We lose," Ken Logan murmured, "and we still gain a half game."

"If we'd won," the Duke growled, "we'd be in first place now." They had two games to go, and the Cougars had to face a fighting Eagle team, the Eagles having gone on a rampage the past few weeks and winning eighteen out of twenty-one to put them in third place.

"The Eagles should grab one of those two games," Logan said quietly, "and if we beat the Jays twice we're in."

The Gray kids bunched their hits the following afternoon, and behind the sterling pitching of the little right hander, Jimmy Meadows, took a 6 to 2 game from the Jays.

The Duke, with both legs bothering him

now, permitted two ground balls to get by him, letting in both Jay runs. The Gray fans gave it to him as he walked from the field at the end of the ninth. Shane easily explained away his hitting by stating that a man could lose much more by one misplay in the field than by three or four base hits.

Jack McKee, himself, called Wade and the Duke into the office the night after the second Jay game. McKee was a small man with a bald head and keen blue eyes.

"I'd like some explanation of these stories," he snapped at Wade. "I let it go when you traded three of my best players because I thought you knew your business. If Malloy isn't giving his best why is he in the game?"

"I'm satisfied with the Duke's work," Wade said quietly.

"Then you stand alone," McKee growled. "If there is any funny work going on here, Wade, I'll have both you men hounded out of baseball." He paused. "And I'll know tomorrow whether you've been on the level."

"We're playing ball to win," Duke Malloy said slowly. "Get that straight, Mac."

"You get this straight," McKee roared. "I took you back with the Grays and gave you a chance to make some real money, Malloy. I don't like to be let down in an underhanded way."

"The Duke's legs aren't what they used to be," Wade put in. "He can't cover the same ground, McKee."

"All I'm interested in," McKee snapped, "is that he's trying to cover his position. The sports writers and the fans think not." He waved his hand in dismissal. "That'll be all."

THEY went outside, the Duke walking stiffly, thinking of the morrow's game. Word had not come through as yet on the Eagle-Cougar game far to the west, there being two hours difference in the time. The two clubs were in the fifteenth inning, tied at two all.

At quarter of nine that night they received the final. Eagles 3, Cougars 2, seventeen innings.

"We're back on top," Sam Wade said incredulously.

"And we'd better stay there," the Duke mumbled. "The chips are down."

Wade looked at him closely. "If anything happens, Duke," he said slowly, "how are you fixed?"

"Not too good," Malloy said grimly. "I was counting on a World Series cut and a contract for next year." It was very evident what would happen if the Jays won out on the morrow and the Cougars took the pennant. McKee wasn't the man to make idle threats. If he were convinced that the pennant had been deliberately lost for his club, it would go hard for the men responsible.

With a pennant hanging on a single ball game, the Gray fans came out in droves, filling every available space in Gray Field, even overflowing out of the left field bleacher seats.

The Duke went through the motions in practice. McKee was sitting in the box watching every move he made.

Sam Wade warmed up young Redfern while the Jays started a right hander by the name of Wallace, with Harrigan out in the pen for reserve.

The bell rang at three o'clock and they took the field with Meade of the Jays leading off. The Duke shifted closer toward first base, Meade hitting from the left side.

Redfern worked the count to three and two and then put one down the middle. Meade cut hard, slashing it between first and second.

Duke Malloy dug into the dirt, reaching with his hands for the rapidly-moving ball. He stumbled as his left leg gave way, regained his balance just as the ball shot by. It went for a single.

Up in the press box the Duke saw Shane grinning down at him, cigarette in his mouth. Jack McKee was leaning over the railing, arms crossed, mouth tight.

Redfern kept the ball high for Prescott, Jap shortstop, hoping to prevent a sacrifice bunt. Prescott managed to get it down to the dirt, advancing Meade to second. Redfern threw the batter out at first.

Frenchy Ledeaux, standing feet far apart, long bat moving easily, shot the second pitch over third base. It went for a double and Meade came in with the first run.

The Canuck stood on second base, hands on hips, laughing in the Duke's face.

"Pack your bag, Duke," Ledeaux called softly. "You're on the way out."

The Jays scored another run when Mc-

Clellan hammered Redfern's hook against the left field fence scoring Ledeaux. It was 2 to 0 at the end of the first.

Up on the scoreboard the Duke watched the figures going up for the other games. There would be no markers for the Eagle-Cougar game for some time.

Wallace, the Jay hurler, threw a fast breaking hook, and he had the Gray batters biting badly the first three innings. In the fourth a double by Logan and a single by Pitts broke the ice for the Grays. The Duke ended the inning by lifting a fly ball to short center.

In the fifth the Grays came back again, fighting mad, slashing out four successive hits against Wallace and driving him from the box. Bixby opened with a single; Lannigan dragged a bunt through first base and was safe. Young Brand, at third for Ledeaux, doubled both runners home, giving them a 3 to 2 lead. Atwood's single to right made it 4 to 2 for the Grays.

Duke Malloy sat on the bench, grinning at Sam Wade. They watched Harrigan striding in from the bull pen. Red Feeney came out from behind the plate, lips curling in a snarl.

"It might not be so hard after all," Sam Wade murmured. "These kids of ours are playing ball, Duke."

Harrigan stopped the rally abruptly and the Grays took the field at the start of the sixth with a 4 to 2 lead.

Red Feeney slashed a sharp single over short to start the inning. The Duke watched the catcher edging off first base. The Jays would probably work a hit and run on the next pitch, or they could decide to attempt a sacrifice bunt.

McVeigh, batting for the Jays, slapped the ball down at short after a futile attempt to bunt. Maxwell had to come in for the roller. Duke Malloy cut over to cover the sack. It was going to be close. He could hear Feeney's pounding feet not far behind him.

Maxwell came up with the ball and whipped it to second just as the Duke touched the sack with his foot. Feeney hit him from behind, knocking the ball from his glove, and sprawling him in the dirt. Both runners were safe.

The Duke climbed to his feet, face white with rage. He looked at Feeney and then at the umpire standing a few feet away. A smash at Feeney's chin now would probably put him out of the ball game.

"How's it feel?" the red-head grinned.

DUKE MALLOY walked back to his position. Redfern, beginning to feel the pace, let go a wild pitch and both runners advanced to second and third respectively.

Sam Wade stood up in the dugout and waved to the bull pen. Sackett started to warm up. With none away, Wade gave the order to pass Albright, Jay second baseman.

Redfern handed out four straight balls on the outside and Albright trotted to first, filling the sacks. The Gray infield moved up close, hoping for a ground ball.

The Duke felt the tension. It was getting tight now. He heard the roar from the stands as the numbers went up on the scoreboard behind him. Glancing back he noticed that the Cougars had knocked in six runs the first inning against the Eagles, and two the second. It was 8 to 0 for the Cougars, and the game practically cinched.

Sam Wade saw the scoreboard also and he shook his head. They had to win now.

Redfern edged up on the rubber and took his stretch with Harrigan batting. The Jay hurler had been a pretty fair sticker with the Grays.

He hit from the left side.

Redfern got a two and two count and then Harrigan cut, the ball moving straight down toward second. It was hit sharply enough to insure an out at home plate, and possibly another out at first.

The Duke took two steps and bent down. He'd handled these balls a thousand times —two thousand times in his career. It was a mechanical act. This ball struck a tiny pebble and bounded over the heel of his glove, rolling through his legs toward right field.

Stunned, he turned around to watch it as the Jay runners scampered over the plate. Two came in, tieing the score. Up in the stands they were on their feet, howling with rage. Several pop bottles fell in the infield and the umpires had to call time till they were picked up. Wads of newspapers were hurled down from the upper tiers all around the diamond.

Sick at heart, the Duke plodded back to his position. From the seats that little bad

hop couldn't be discerned. The ball had barely leaped over his glove.

McKee was standing up in the box, talking rapidly to Sam Wade who was on the dugout steps. The Duke, without hearing the words, knew the tenor of the conversation. McKee wanted him benched immediately, but Wade was shaking his head.

The play went on with Meade blasting a line single to left scoring another run and putting the Jays in the lead. Redfern went out and Sackett came in. It was 5 to 4 for the Jays when the inning ended.

Duke Malloy came in with his cap pulled down tight over his eyes. He heard the boos but he didn't look up. Sam Wade said:

"What happened, Duke?"

"She hopped bad," Duke Malloy told him quietly. "You can believe that or not, Sam."

"I believe it," Wade nodded. He added as an afterthought. "McKee doesn't."

"You want me to finish? Duke Malloy asked.

"If we go down," Wade said, "we'll go together." He grinned. "We need one run, Duke."

Harrigan, with only a day's rest, was hurling brilliant ball, his hooks breaking on the corners, turning back Gray batter after batter.

In the eighth the Jays threatened again, the Canuck starting the proceedings with a line single to center. He stole second with two away, knifing Duke Malloy's legs from beneath him as he hit the sack. The throw from the plate was slow and Ledeaux was safe.

Shaking, the Duke got to his feet and dusted himself off. The spike wound was bleeding again and he could feel the blood in his sock, seeping down into his spike shoes. This was the eighth and he had an inning left to redeem himself.

Sackett passed the next batter and then Red Feeney came into the rectangle with two down and two aboard. The Jay catcher slammed the first pitch through the box, nearly taking off Sackett's legs.

Duke Malloy cut over on legs that had suddenly become wobbly. He saw the white pill shooting over the bag and then he flung himself headlong, knocking the ball down with his bare hand.

From a sitting position he tossed it to Maxwell covering the bag, making the final out. The kid shortstop didn't say anything as they went in. It would take a great deal to make up for that bobble with the bases loaded.

Harrigan stopped them again, and they went into the ninth still trailing the Jays by a single run. The Cougars had made it 10 to 0 against the Eagles in the fourth inning.

Sam Wade was standing up as his team trotted toward the bench after retiring the Jays in order.

"We need a run," Wade said quietly.

Allen, kid catcher, jaw clenched, rammed a single into right field. The Duke heard the noise from the dugout. He was too tired even to lean forward.

Wade threw in Peluso, a pinch hitter for Sackett. Peluso made a great show of hitting away, and then dropped a bunt along first base. He was out but Allen got to second base.

WADE walked down to talk to Ken Logan the next Gray batter. The Duke stirred as Pitts went out of the dugout to select his bat. He followed Pitts, and if either man hit safely, he would get another crack at Harrigan.

Logan waited quietly, fouling off several pitches till he got the one he wanted. The Duke heard Logan's yellow bat crack as the little centerfielder slammed one down the left field line. The Gray crowd roared as Allen cut for third and rounded the sack.

Wade called him back as leftfielder, Meade, threw a strike to Feeney from left field. Logan chased down to second, putting runners on second and third with one away.

Pitts came into the rectangle, obviously nervous. He was on the spot and he knew it. Duke Malloy came out of the dugout and walked to the bat rack, selecting his black stick.

Pitts cut at Harrigan's hook, missing it cleanly on the first pitch. He took two balls and then lifted a fly behind the plate. Feeney gathered it in for out two.

The Duke looked at Wade and waited. He heard Jack McKee's voice behind him, bellowing at Wade.

"Take that bum out," McKee roared.

"He bats for me," Wade said grimly. "I run this club on the field, Mac."

"You won't run it after today," McKee told him.

The Duke stood by, knocking dirt from his spikes with the black bat.

"Go ahead," Wade said. "You bat, Malloy."

Red Feeney squatted down to give his signal. The Duke looked steadily at Umpire Brick Randall.

"Don't let this monkey tip my bat," he said calmly.

"Play ball," Randall growled. "I'll run the game."

Harrigan was up on the hill.

"Get this louse," Feeney called. "Get him, kid."

Harrigan's hook cut the outside corner. It was good, but not the ball the Duke wanted. It went for a strike.

DUKE MALLOY'S gray eyes drifted across the field. Logan shook a fist at him from second base. Allen was a few feet off third base.

Harrigan took his stretch and let go. It was fast—everything the left hander had—a little too close. Brick Randall called it a ball. One and one.

The Duke fouled off the next—back into the net for another strike, giving Harrigan a big edge to work on.

"We got him," Feeney yelped. "He's got a one way ticket to the bushes."

Harrigan tried to get the Duke to bite on a high one. He let it go by, making it two and two. The next pitch would be in, probably the hook, cutting one of the corners.

Duke Malloy dug in with his spikes. He waved the black bat once and then let it rest in position. Harrigan's left arm went back and the ball was coming in—very small, curving inward.

The Duke timed it perfectly, let the black bat ride in a precise circle, catching the pill just as it clipped the inside corner. He heard the crack and he had the feeling in his arms—the true feeling when ball meets bat squarely.

He saw the ball line out sharply over Ledeaux's head. The Canuck leaped high, but missed it by inches. Logan shot down from second base, cut around third and came in behind Allen with the winning run. The Duke hobbled down to first, turned, and walked to the dugout.

It was over, and very quickly. Jack McKee was standing up in the box; the Gray fans were silent for a moment as if they didn't believe their eyes.

Sam Wade was walking toward the Duke, hand outstretched, grinning. As they entered the dugout the noise started, and they could hear it all the way as they walked down the ramp toward the dressing room.

"Let Shane explain that one," Wade was saying, his hand on the Duke's shoulder.

That night an enterprising young reporter by the name of Haley dug up a number of cancelled checks made out by the gambler, Sam Borden, to Feeney, Ledeaux and Harrigan. In a statement to the press Borden admitted they were for services rendered, but refused to explain the nature of the services.

"That's it," Wade grinned when the story exploded the next day in the papers. "Those boys will be called before the commissioner and I wouldn't give a dime for their chances. They'll be railroaded out of baseball."

"So we're in the clear," Duke Malloy muttered.

"Clear as ice," Wade said.

Jack McKee called them into the office the same afternoon and held out his hand.

"I know when I was wrong," the old man grinned. He slapped the Duke's shoulder. "That hit down the left field line added ten years to my life, Duke."

Duke Malloy nodded. McKee was talking to Wade.

"You're through as manager of the Grays," the old man murmured.

Wade gulped. "Through!" he asked weakly.

"I got a new job for you," Jack McKee grinned. "You're taking over our whole chain, Sam—general manager. How about it?"

Wade nodded. He looked at Duke Malloy.

"I'm signing the Duke to run the Grays," McKee went on, "if he wants to take the chance."

"Run the Grays?" Duke Malloy mumbled. "Manager?"

"You got it," McKee said. "How about it?"

"Sure," Duke Malloy whispered. "Why not, Mac." He felt very tired, but also very happy.

Well, a Great Kidder Can Usually Kid Himself Out of Any Sort of Spot

No Kidding

By

PATRICK O'KEEFFE

Author of "Heave To!" etc.

WITH a yawn on waking up in the darkness of the blacked-out cabin, Chief Steward Jeffrey looked at his luminous wrist-watch. Almost a quarter past seven. He'd lots of time to wash and shave before breakfast, he decided lazily, and rolled over again.

He grinned as he imagined the excitement that would result if he dozed off again and overslept. When he was missed, his cabin would be found empty, and unless the deckhead over his bunk was still leaking from the heavy rain of last evening, no one would guess that he'd got up in exasperation during the early part of the night, unlocked one of the empty passenger cabins, and resumed his sleep in there. It would be thought that he'd gone overboard. He'd never be able to convince anybody that he hadn't done it for a joke. They knew him too well.

Jeffrey by now was becoming aware of a change in the ship. With a start, he realized what it was. The light tremors and thumps imparted by her engines were missing. She was stopped.

His sleepiness vanished. His hand shot upwards to the bunk reading-lamp switch. No light flashed on. Tossing aside the bed clothes, he came to his knees and groped for the dogs of a black-painted port over the bunk. Unscrewing them, he threw back the port and thrust his face into the round opening. There was nothing in sight on the gray calm sea off the starboard side—no vessel, boat, or raft. Nor anything else for which the ship might have stopped.

Jutting his head out further and glancing astern, he was amazed to see the boat falls and knotted lifelines hanging from the two davits above, the four heavy fall blocks dangling empty just above the surface. The lifeboats had gone.

Jeffrey swung his long bony legs over the edge of the bunk into his slippers, and hastened from the cabin in his underwear. The alleyway was dark and, strangely, without the clatter of pots and dishes and the hum of voices from galley and saloon usual at that hour. Groping blindly toward the black-out curtain, which should have been drawn aside by now, Jeffrey found the door beyond it and burst out on the bridge deck.

There was not a man visible along its entire length. Jeffrey dashed up a ladder to the boat deck. This, too, was as deserted as an ice floe, and Jeffrey was further dumb-

founded to find that the two lifeboats on the port side also had vanished. He ran to the bridge, thence to the wheelhouse and to the chartroom beyond. All three were silent and empty. He was now ready to admit the dismaying fact. Captain and crew had abandoned ship without him.

"And only a minute ago," he groaned weakly, "I was picturing it something like the other way about."

He knew of others who had found themselves in a similar plight, and in his case he could see how it had come about. Being a heavy sleeper, he had not wakened to the alarm bells; it wasn't the first time he'd slept through them. If anyone had made a hurried round of the quarters to see that no one was being left behind, he would have found his cabin empty with the lights on, and assumed that he was on deck at the boats. No one would waste time on the passenger cabins, which were known to be kept locked.

BUT why had the ship been abandoned? Jeffrey asked himself this question dumbly as he went out on the boat deck again and gazed around. She seemed to be on an even keel and as upright as if she were in drydock; she hadn't cracked in two, but then she wasn't a war-time welded job; and there was no sign of fire, no smoke coming from ventilators. She appeared to be as orderly as a model in a glass showcase. Her engines may have broken down, but it would be fantastic to think that Captain Gillet would have abandoned her for that reason, even though her holds were packed full of munitions and she was a sitting duck for the U-boat reported by radio yesterday to be in the vicinity.

"It's all a crazy dream," Jeffrey told himself in a dazed whisper. "Someone gave me a marijuana cigarette to get even."

He was alluding to any one of the numerous victims of his kidding, spoofing, and leg-pulling. Before the war they were to be found chiefly among the half dozen or so passengers carried monthly in the West Indies service by the *Granton*. If they were first-trippers, they learned from their young and humorous chief steward with the sandy hair that the fresh milk was provided by cows kept in a special shippen below decks, or that the men who steered the ship were all hand-picked ex-bus drivers; and without a twinkle in his blue eyes, Jeffrey, who could concoct the most outlandish yarns as he went along, would confide that only last trip hard-case Captain Gillet had hanged a man at the yard arm for giving him some lip.

"No kidding," he would solemnly declare if this seemed to strain their credulity. "He hitched him up as quick as you'd hitch up your pants."

WHEN the *Granton* was transferred to the Atlantic war supply routes, without passengers, and without convoy or escort because of her speed, Jeffrey preyed on the greenhorns recruited from all parts of the country for the expanding Merchant Marine. Only yesterday he had held the hillbilly carpenter open-mouthed with a leg-pulling yarn about a ship he saw torpedoed last voyage and the way she kept herself afloat by sending aloft her barrage balloon to hold her up.

Shivering in the raw spring air, Jeffrey decided to dress before investigating further into the cause of the *Granton's* abandonment. He went down to his cabin, lighting his way through the blacked-out quarters with a portable emergency battery lamp unhooked from a bulkhead. After hurriedly slipping into his sea-going rig of khaki trousers and dark-blue sweater, he started out to examine the lower part of the ship first. He flashed the lamp around engineers' cabins, crew spaces, messrooms, galley. He climbed down to the silent engine and boiler rooms. Here he detected nothing amiss, although he knew he would not recognize a breakdown among the stilled machinery short of something as eye-hitting as a chewed-up propeller shaft. He came up no less mystified than when he had gone below.

He went up to the captain's cabin. Here he found the safe wide open and its confidential contents removed. He came across nothing to throw any light on the mystery. He was no more successful in the deck officers' cabins. He tramped down the short inside alleyway to the radio room, his footsteps ringing hollow through the silent accommodation. Lying beside the radio sending key was a slip of paper. Jeffrey peered at it in the rays of the lamp. It was the

distress message, scribbled in the captain's handwriting.

SOS ABANDONING SHIP IN LAT 28.46 NORTH LONG 35.19 WEST REQUEST ASSISTANCE

Jeffrey was even more baffled. It was usual to state the cause of the distress in an SOS call, such as collision, torpedoed. In the *Granton's* case, it seemed to have been withheld.

"If it didn't sound quite so batty," Jeffrey whispered feebly, "I'd say it's all one big joke, and pretty soon all hands will pop out of hiding."

He suddenly became still as the sound of motors penetrated the closed cabin. Besides the door through which he had entered, there was another leading on deck. Darting to it, Jeffrey snapped back the catch, but just as he was about to rush out, he froze with the door only partly open.

A large U-boat was approaching the motionless *Granton,* her deck and superstructure still wet from recent surfacing. Her commander seemingly knew that the merchant vessel was abandoned, for he was maneuvering to come alongside, and men stood fore and aft with lines for making her fast; but he was also guarding against a possibility that enough men might still be aboard the *Granton* to man her gun, since the U-boat's own gun was ready for action, and a machine-gun mounted on the conning tower swayed too and fro in an arc that covered the merchantman's decks.

JEFFREY hastily closed the door again, lest the machine-gunner spot him and give him a playful burst. He guessed that the U-boat intended to search the *Granton* for secret books and papers and other material of value to the German Naval Intelligence, loot her, and then withdraw and shell her until she blew up. But where would he be when that happened?

"It won't do me any good to hide," Jeffrey groaned.

He sank into the operator's chair, feeling that it would be safer to let himself be found rather than venture out on deck and be shot at as something moving. Before long he felt the bump as the submarine came alongside, and soon he heard footsteps on deck. Daylight partly filled the cabin as the door was suddenly wrenched open by a young haughty-faced German officer in blue uniform. Behind him was a sailor in half whites and blues.

The officer started at the sight of Jeffrey sitting calmly in the semi-darkness. The pistol gripped in his free hand came up sharply, but was slowly lowered.

"Nice morning, Lieutenant," said Jeffrey easily.

The officer took in the room at a glance. "Are you der vireless operator?" he demanded.

"No. Chief steward to you. Belly robber to the late crew."

"Vy did you not abandon ship vit der rest?"

Jeffrey grinned. "I wasn't called in time."

The officer frowned. "You try to be funny, no? Vy vos she abandoned?"

Jeffrey grinned again. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"I see," snapped the German. "You vill not talk." He turned to the U-boat sailor, said something in German, and then looked back at Jeffrey. "Do not try to go from der cabin," he warned, and then strode away.

The sailor, also armed with a pistol, remained by the door. He could not speak English, and so Jeffrey sat mute until the officer returned some twenty minutes later. Beckoning Jeffrey to follow him, he led the way down to the next deck and along to another officer, who, judging by the way the young officer saluted and stepped aside, was obviously the U-boat commander. He was in blues and wore a crushed cap, and his face look to Jeffrey as if he had just sucked a lemon. He studied Jeffrey with a pair of steely-blue eyes.

"Before I destroy this ship," he said in slow careful English, "I shall have to decide what to do with you—whether to leave you on board, or encumber myself with you in the submarine. My decision will be governed by the manner in which you answer my questions. You understand my meaning perfectly?"

"Sure," returned Jeffrey. "Talk or else—"

The commander frowned. "Why was the ship abandoned, and why did you not go in the boats?"

So it was as much a mystery to him! Jef-

frey was suddenly dismayed by a doubt whether he would be able to convince the commander that he knew as little as he did. The commander might suspect that he was hiding something, and deal with him accordingly. He stood looking at the commander dumbly.

"You refuse to answer?" demanded the commander.

Jeffrey groaned to himself. He'd have to make up something and hope to get away with it. He wouldn't be any worse off if he failed.

"I can't say for sure why she was abandoned," said Jeffrey hesitantly, "but—well, I have a pretty good idea." He paused to let his mind run on ahead feverishly looking for it.

"What is it?"

"Well, you see"—Jeffrey was desperately waiting for an inspiration, and suddenly it came—"the captain got scared during the night." Jeffrey spoke as if reluctant to make the admission.

"For what reason?" asked the commander curiously.

"A radio message he got yesterday afternoon—a report that a submarine had been sighted on our course. It might have been yours."

"Possibly. But go on," snapped the commander impatiently.

"Well, I figure it gave him the jitters. In fact," went on Jeffrey as ideas began to come fast, "we all had them on and off ever since we sailed with a full load of explosives. U-boat fever, we call it. We've all been torpedoed two or three times, the captain oftener. So when it got round yesterday about the submarine, it only needed a word from the captain to start a scramble for the boats. I guess he must have cracked during the night. All I know is that I woke up this morning and found the boats and everybody gone."

The commander's eyes gleamed with intense satisfaction; but suddenly they narrowed. "The jitters," he observed curiously, "did not interfere with your sleep."

"Last night I drank almost a whole quart of scotch to steady my nerves. That usually fixes me up for a day or two. I guess that's why I slept through the alarms for abandon ship. I think everybody was in too big a hurry to get away to bother to check up.

"And do not the captain and crew expect to be punished when they reach America?" pursued the commander. "They were picked up almost immediately by a Spanish ship bound there."

"Sure. They'll be sent to concentration camps. But who cares about that? No U-boats there."

"Concentration camps!" The U-boat commander seemed to pounce on this. "America boasts of having no need for them."

"They're called rest camps—supposed to be for seamen taking a rest cure for convoy nerves. But so many have been deserting ship or refusing to sail that the Government had to start using them instead of jails, to keep it from leaking out. It's got so bad that they're having to bring the President aboard some ships to plead with crews to sail."

The commander caught his breath. "The President!"

"No kidding. They bring him aboard in disguise, so it won't get around. One of our crew saw him come aboard his last ship wearing red whiskers."

THE commander's sour face lit up gleefully. He turned to the young officer, and for a few moments the pair chuckled remarks together in German. Jeffrey caught the word "Goebbels," and he had to struggle to keep a straight face at the thought that his spoofing story might be broadcast to the world from the German Propaganda Ministry.

The commander turned back to him. "You have answered my questions very satisfactorily. For that you will have the freedom of the ship during our stay here, except that you must remain in your cabin after dark."

Jeffrey eyed him in astonishment. "After dark! Then how long do you mean to stay aboard?"

"A day or two, perhaps more. I wish to take advantage of this exceptional opportunity to give my men a rest cure." The commander smiled at his quip. "We have been at sea for two months, and they will enjoy the chance of stretching their legs, comfortable bunks, hot baths with unlimited water. I really came in the hope of replenishing my stores. We heard the SOS. I was curious because no reason was given, and suspected that the ship might still be afloat.

TO THE MAN WHO WANTS SUCCESS AFTER THE WAR

If you want success and security when peace comes, prepare for it now. Make sure that you have the trained ability that employers will want and pay for in the post-war adjustment.

As business converts back to civilian goods, there will be urgent call for accountants, bookkeepers, salesmen, sales and credit correspondents, traffic managers, marketing men, secretaries, office managers and legally trained executives.

For 35 years, LaSalle has been training adults in their spare time for such positions. It knows how. It can train you—quickly, thoroughly, at moderate cost, and without interruption to your present work.

Mark the coupon below for our free booklet about the field of your interest. It costs nothing to get the facts and they may lead you to larger security and success—now and after the armistice whistles blow.

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
A Correspondence Institution
Dept. 875-R CHICAGO 15, ILL.

I am interested in knowing what your training is and how it can help me in the post-war adjustment. Please send me your free booklet on the field I have marked below.

☐Accounting	☐Office Management
☐Bookkeeping	☐Business Correspondence
☐Salesmanship	☐Traffic Management
☐Business English	☐Executive Management
☐Law: LL.B. Degree	☐Foremanship
☐Business Law	☐Industrial Management

☐Stenotypy: machine shorthand

Name.....*Age*.....

Position.....

Address.....

City.....*State*.....

I did not expect to find her perfectly seaworthy and habitable. It was an agreeable surprise. I shall remain until I feel it is time to resume spreading U-boat fever." The commander smiled again. "Unless, of course, an enemy warship is sighted, and I am compelled to leave in a hurry."

The commander and his subordinate then walked away in good humor. Jeffrey stared after them blankly. By staying aboard for a day or more instead of for a few minutes, as he had thought, the Germans might discover the true cause of the ship's abandonment, and the commander suspect that he had been spoofed.

And he might not have a sense for that kind of humor, thought Jeffrey dismally.

Having had no breakfast, he headed for the galley. On his way along the deck he saw that the U-boat crew had already broken into his storerooms and were transferring cases of canned goods, meat, and fresh vegetables to the hatches of the submarine. Two men, he observed, had been posted in the crow's nest.

In the galley he found another pair starting the coal fires. They stared at him, and one said something in German, at which the other guffawed. Jeffrey mimicked him, and they both glowered. From the ice-box he took some sandwiches left over from night lunch, but the coffee in the urn had turned cold for lack of steam. He carried the sandwiches to his cabin and munched them in doleful contemplation of becoming a prisoner of war in Germany. Again he tried to puzzle out the mystery of the ship's abandonment, but with as little success as before.

After finishing the sandwiches he glanced at his wristwatch. About this time every day he usually went up to the radio room to listen to one of the hourly short-wave news bulletins, tuned in by the operator. There was no operator now, but he might be able to pick up something himself. There seemed nothing else to do at present.

On entering the radio room Jeffrey was eyed suspiciously by a U-boat operator, who was examining the equipment, but the German did not object when Jeffrey dropped into the chair and switched on the battery-powered receiver. Jeffrey turned the tuning knob until he heard an announcer saying, "This is the voice of America, one of the United Nations."

There came a few items about progress on the fighting fronts, and then followed domestic news.

"A plot by enemy agents to place powerful time bombs in the holds of munitions ships loading in American ports has been uncovered by the F. B. I. One such bomb was found in the hold of a ship while loading and safely removed. A similar bomb was placed in the hold of a ship which sailed from a southern port several days ago. It was timed to explode about a week after the ship had departed. Fortunately the plot was discovered early enough to warn her by radio and order her abandoned. Her name was not revealed, but the crew are reported safe aboard another vessel.

"The Senate yesterday——"

Jeffrey had become oblivious of the newscaster's voice. His hair turned as stiff as bristles on a scrubbing brush as he reminded himself that the *Granton* had sailed from a southern port—six days ago! That her crew had abandoned her, were safe aboard another vessel. These details fitted her as neatly as her own hatch covers. Explained, too, was the absence of any reason for the distress in her SOS message; Captain Gillet would withhold it as information of value to the enemy, until it was given out officially.

Jeffrey's spine wilted as he thought of the time bomb lying somewhere among the tons of T.N.T., blockbusters, and shells filling all four holds.

"I'll never sleep in a spare cabin again as long as I live," he wailed, "and that may not be very long."

THE U-boat operator, who was peering into the interior of the ship's radio transmitter, turned quickly at the sound of Jeffrey's anguished voice. He seemed to take alarm at the look on his face, and suddenly hurried from the cabin.

"He's gone to get someone to question me," groaned Jeffrey. "What am I going to say? It won't help me any to tell them, even if they believed me."

The U-boat operator returned after a few minutes with the commander. Jeffrey was looking like a doomed man.

"You heard something over the wireless which terrified you?" queried the commander excitedly.

MONEY

FOR YOUR DOCTOR AND HOSPITAL BILLS

Only $1 per month gives you this FREEDOM from worry

● DON'T WAIT for sickness and accident to strike. *Act now* to save yourself from worry and debt arising from medical and hospital expense. Only $1 a month invested in our liberal hospitalization policy *helps pay your doctor and hospital costs.* Gives you money when you may need it most. You may go to any hospital in the U.S., under any doctor's care. Your sick or accident costs will be paid exactly as the policy specifies. Individuals or whole families (age 18 to 65) eligible. No medical examination. No agent will call.

Company under supervision, Insurance Department, State of Indiana.

Check These Policy Features:

- **$1000 Accidental Death Benefit,** for loss of life or dismemberment.
- **$6 Per Day Hospital Coverage,** for hospital costs, including room, up to this maximum.
- **Maternity Benefit,** if both husband and wife are insured.
- **Disability Benefit,** covering loss of time up to maximum of $300, *as provided in the policy.*

Clip This Coupon and MAIL TODAY in Envelope—or Paste on Postcard

AMERICAN TRAVELERS LIFE INSURANCE CO.
Dept. A, J.M.S. Bldg., South Bend 5, Indiana
Please send me, without obligation, details about your "$1-a-month hospitalization insurance plan."

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____

PRINT ANY PHOTO
on Paper, Cloth, Leather or Wood

SIMPLE, EASY TO USE

Magic liquid takes only 2 minutes to reproduce any snapshot you have on to stationery, handkerchiefs, ties, scarfs, etc. Won't wash off. Won't hurt negative or fabric it's used on. Personalize your belongings! An ideal gift. Complete outfit with full colors included, enough for 100 photos—*only $1.00 postpaid.* Sent C.O.D. for $1.18.

CHRISTY PHOTO SUPPLY
Dept. 212 2835 N. Central, Chicago

USED Correspondence Courses

Complete HOME-STUDY Courses and self-instruction books, slightly used. Rented, sold, exchanged. All subjects. Satisfaction guaranteed. Cash paid for used courses. Full details and 92-page illustrated bargain catalog Free. Write now.

NELSON COMPANY
321 So. Wabash Avenue, Dept. 2-23, Chicago 4, Ill.

DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have. Make yourself free and happy with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men.

30 Years in Business

FREE BOOK

THE NEWELL COMPANY
600 Clayton Sta., St. Louis, Mo.

Externally Caused PIMPLES

ACNE, BLACKHEADS, OILY SKIN, RED PATCHES
Discouraged by soaps and salves? SEBOLINE applied nightly often shows improvement in a week. Money Back if not completely satisfied after 2 weeks. *Skin Specialist Prescription. SENT ON TRIAL.* You risk nothing.
FREE Send for Free Booklet at Once. Don't suffer embarrassment any longer. WRITE TODAY.
Seboline Lab., Dept. V, P.O. Box 350, Independence, Mo.

PULVEX
FLEA POWDER
Kills fleas
25¢ AND 50¢
JUST APPLY TO ONE SPOT

AMAZING CURE DANDRUFF

Get rid of that dandruff in 1 or 2 treatments with Parish Dandruff remover, endorsed by a famous Cosmetologist. Send NOW — don't wait. for only $1.00

E. E. & L. P. PARISH CO. Box 91, Marion, Ohio

NAME .....

CITY ..... State .....

CUT OUT

Let's Go! Give 'em a Knockout!

BUY WAR BONDS!

Jeffrey groaned. "It was given out that over a hundred U-boats were sunk last month, and only a few ever manage to crawl back to their bases."

The commander eyed him stupidly. "Why should that frighten you?"

"Because I'm as good as dead," moaned Jeffrey. "You'll take me in the submarine and she'll be sunk." He held up a trembling hand. "It's brought on the jitters again."

The commander burst into a contemptuous laugh. "You believe that fantastic nonsense?"

"It came straight from the White House."

"That makes it authentic," sneered the commander. "It could not by any chance be a lying piece of propaganda to cure U-boat fever?"

"The President doesn't lie."

"Swears by his red beard," jibed the commander. "A voyage to Germany in a U-boat will convince you that his statements are as false as his whiskers."

"If we got there safely," moaned Jeffrey, "it would only mean that yours happened to be a lucky one. I'd just as soon you decided right now not to take me along."

"And be destroyed with the ship? Or do you expect me to spare her for your sake?" inquired the commander sarcastically.

"I'll take my chance on a raft," replied Jeffrey.

"Very well," snapped the commander. "I had not decided, but you have decided for me. If you are so stupid as to believe such lying propaganda, and think you have a better chance of surviving on a raft in mid-Atlantic than in a U-boat, it is what you deserve. You have made your choice. Do not come to me later and say that you have regretted."

Jeffrey jumped up. "I won't stay long enough for that. I'm on my way right now," he replied, adding as the commander seemed curious over his haste to depart, "if an Allied warship shows up you're going to leave in a hurry and blow up the ship before I get a chance to paddle clear."

"If I have to leave in a hurry," remarked the commander with a grim smile, "you may have other rafts for company."

He then went out. Jeffrey was on his heels. He hurried down to his cabin, grabbed up his personal papers and some extra clothes, and then hastened out on to

the foredeck. Choosing a raft on the side opposite to that on which the U-boat was tied up, he set about releasing it. A U-boat sailor made to interfere, but was checked by a word from his commander, who stood watching with a dry smile from the bridge. The big slatted box-shaped raft slid down its inclined skids and struck the sea with a heavy splash. Jeffrey threw his things on to it, and in a few moments he was aboard and rowing.

He had not got many yards away from the ship before he heard a burst of derisive laughter. Glancing back, he saw that the U-boat's officers and crew were crowded at the ship's rails and port-holes, and one had a movie camera. The commander, it seemed, had staged a little send-off.

"Giff my luff to red vhiskers," jeered the young haughty-faced officer.

Jeffrey grinned to himself. "It looks like I'm making a good show for their morale. Too bad I can't stop to pass around the hat.

He then settled down to putting the greatest distance between himself and the time bomb in the shortest time. He rowed and paddled strenuously, thankful for the flat sea and low wind. Except for brief spells in which to get his breath, he did not stop rowing the heavy raft until the ship had become little more than two masts and a funnel.

Exhausted and soaked in perspiration, he lay flat on his back and gave himself up to an ecstasy of wild relief. He chuckled as he recalled the manner in which he had spoofed the U-boat commander a second time. But the joke would be on him, he mused wryly, if the bomb turned out to be a dud, and he'd got himself stuck on a raft for nothing.

HE SPECULATED on his prospects of being rescued. He placed his best hope in the likelihood that a warship would be ordered to search for the abandoned *Granton* and dispose of her if still afloat. If that hope failed, and he had to depend on some convoy or single ship passing his way, then he had enough emergency rations and water stored on the raft to last for weeks, as well as blankets and hoods to protect him from cold and sun. It was rough weather he would have to fear most.

NOW SING POPULAR COWBOY SONGS and MOUNTAIN BALLADS

WITH WORDS AND MUSIC

Now sing all the famous cowboy songs, old-time songs and enjoy famous poems and recitations to your heart's content. These are original mountain ballads with words and music . . . the kind that our cowboys still sing out on the prairies and deep in the heart of Texas. They're the songs our real he-men amuse themselves with when alone, or to fascinate, attract and lure cowgirls to their hearts. These songs and recitations have lived traditionally with Americans, and will live forever because they still hold fascination and afford wholesome fun and recreation.

Here you have a great volume which contains famous cowboy songs and mountain ballads along with words and music. Imagine yourself singing these when lights are low or on one of those hilarious parties when everyone wants to sing. You will be popular because you know them and you will be happier when you sing them. Special price.

50¢

When good fellows get together, no matter what tune is the hit of the day, sooner or later they will all start singing "Sweet Adeline" and many other famous tunes in the American way. This volume includes dozens, yes, hundreds of the songs with music you will want to remember and want to sing again. Order your copy while the limited supply is available at

50¢

Now thrill others the way you have been thrilled with "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," "The Spell of the Yukon," "The Face on the Barroom Floor," "Boots, Boots, Boots," and hundreds of other Kipling poems, along with dozens and dozens of famous recitations . . . now memorize these truly American odes and watch your popularity increase.

50¢

All 3 $1.00 Making One FREE

SEND NO MONEY

The price of each of the above books is an amazing bargain at 50¢ a copy. Order all 3 and enjoy still a further saving, making one book free because the entire set of 3 costs you only $1.00. Rush coupon now. You take no risk. If not satisfied after 5 days, return for full refund.

PICKWICK COMPANY, Dept. 3808
73 West 44th Street, New York 18, N. Y.

Send books checked below at once in plain wrapper. I enclose $..... (cash or money order)

☐ If C. O. D. preferred, mark X in box, mail coupon, and pay postman $1 plus 38¢ postage.
☐ Send all 3 books.

Send books checked:
☐ Famous Cowboy Songs and Mountain Ballads.
☐ Famous Old-Time Songs. ☐ Famous Poems and Recitations.

NAME.....

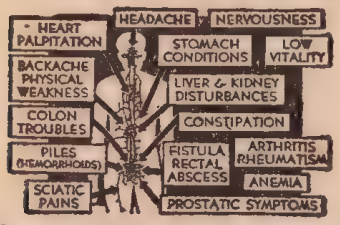
STREET.....

CITY & ZONE..... STATE.....

20% additional for Canada

New Facts on Chronic Ailments

FREE BOOK—Explains Dangers Of Piles—Colon Troubles



40-page FREE BOOK explains the causes and effects of these ailments. Write today—Thornton & Minor Clinic, Suite C-802, 926 McGee St., Kansas City, Mo.

ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS

for adults (vest pocket size). The kind you like! 10 different booklets sent for 50c or 25 assorted for $1. Shipped prepaid in plain wrapper. No C.O.D. orders. Send cash or money order. No stamps.

GRAYKO, Dept. A-301
Box 520, G. P. O., New York 1

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

MEN AND WOMEN, 18 to 50

Many Swedish Massage graduates make $50, $75 or even more per week. Large full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. You can win independence and prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma. Anatomy Charts and 32-page Illustrated Book FREE—Now!

THE College of Swedish Massage, Dept. C12, 100 E. Ohio St., Chicago 11, Illinois.

POEMS WANTED

For Musical Setting

Mother, Home, Love, Sacred, Patriotic, Comic or any subject. Don't Delay—Send us your Original Poem at once—for immediate examination and FREE Rhyming Dictionary.

RICHARD BROTHERS 27 WOODS BUILDING CHICAGO, ILL.

PILES Try Page's Palliative PILE PREPARATIONS

If you are troubled with itching, bleeding or protruding piles, write for a FREE sample of Page's Palliative Pile Preparations and you may bless the day you read this. Don't wait. WRITE TODAY!

E. R. PAGE CO., Dept. 488K8 Marshall, Mich.
IN CANADA, DEPT. 488K8, TORONTO, ONT.

High School Course at Home Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H.S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. HC-39, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

In the late afternoon he heard a distant explosion. He came quickly to his feet. Where the ship had been there was now an immense mass of black and gray smoke reaching into the blue sky. Jeffrey sat down again as the raft began to toss in the fringe of the vast upheaval caused by the explosion.

"All my good propaganda work gone up in smoke," he sighed.

Toward dusk he was excited to see what looked like a warship outlined against the red sun.

He sent up parachute flares from a signal pistol, and was jubilant to see the vessel turn in his direction.

She was a light cruiser, and when she was drifting up to the raft, he heard his name shouted. Peering up in the half light, he was astonished to recognize the portly figure of Captain Gillet, as well as other men from the *Granton,* at the rails.

They surrounded him when he was hauled up and landed on the cruiser's deck. They told him that he had not been missed until a check was made aboard the Spanish rescue ship. The Spanish captain, having discovered the reason for the abandonment, refused to turn back and risk his ship. The cruiser, ordered to search for the *Granton,* had heard the Spanish ship respond to the SOS, and had intercepted her to remove the survivors.

Jeffrey then began to explain why he had taken to the raft. He was feeling highly proud of himself and bursting to tell his story. But before he had gone very far, skeptical grins appeared among his old shipmates, who knew him too well.

"No kidding," Jeffrey cried. "And I said to the commander—"

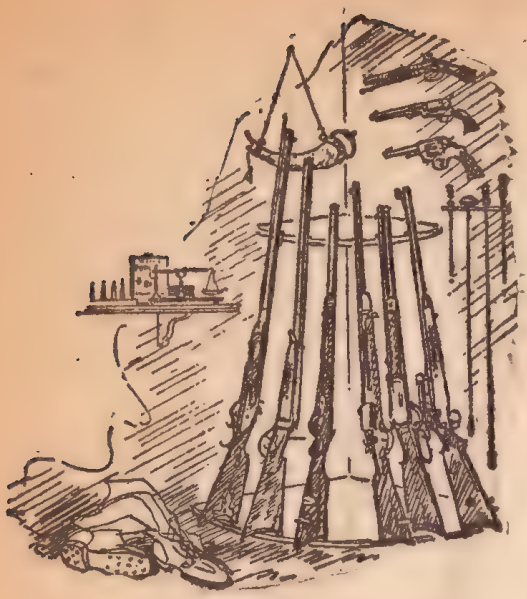
"No kidding," they mocked.

Jeffrey eyed them indignantly. Then in sudden dismay he realized that he had no proof to offer.

"The best yarn I ever had to tell," he wailed, "and no one will even listen to it."

KEEP THEM ON THE RUN

BUY WAR BONDS AND STAMPS EVERY DAY



THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by

PETE KUHLHOFF

The Remington-Hepburn Rifle

AWHILE back I was looking around for a single shot rifle action that would be suitable for rebarreling. A chap out in Illinois had a wild-cat cartridge that was supposed to be a pip. I wanted to try it out and see if it was all it was cracked up to be.

The old Winchester single shot action is generally considered about the best for conversion—as it is very strong and will take quite a beating—especially the blued one—a great many of these actions are case hardened and are not as strong as the ones in blue.

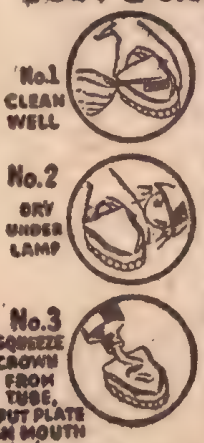
I couldn't locate a good one that could be had for a reasonable price (at least what I considered a reasonable price) so I decided to use the old Remington-Hepburn single shot action if I could find one in good condition.

FREE OFFER FOR FALSE TEETH
with your order
CROWN Dental CLEANER
★ Everyone who wears plates will welcome this free offer. CROWN DENTAL CLEANER is an especially prepared antiseptic preparation to keep your plates clean and help eliminate bad breath and foreign substances that collect and cause discomfort.

TIGHTENS FALSE TEETH or NO COST!

KLEET'S new amazing mouth comfort without risking a single cent... enjoy that feeling of having your own teeth again. Satisfy your desire for food . . . eat what you want. CROWN RELINER TIGHTENS FALSE TEETH OR NO COST. PERFECT FOR PARTIALS, LOWERS AND UPPERS. Don't suffer embarrassment and discomfort caused by loose dental plates. Apply CROWN RELINER. In a jiffy your plate fits like new and stays that way up to 4 months. No old-fashioned heating to burn your mouth. Just squeeze CROWN from tube and put your teeth back in. They'll fit as snugly as ever. Inventor is a recognized authority in dental field. A patent has been applied for CROWN RELINER to protect you from imitators. After you reline your plate with CROWN, take your false teeth out for cleaning without affecting the CROWN RELINER. CROWN RELINER is guaranteed . . . it's harmless. It's tasteless. Has that natural pink color. NOT A POWDER OR PASTE! DOES NOT BURN OR IRRITATE. If not satisfied even after 4 months return partly used tube for full refund.

JUST 3 STEPS



SEND NO MONEY for CROWN

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

EATS STEAK!

J. Clements of Algonac writes: "My plates were so bad they rattled when I talked. Now I can eat steaks, corn on the cob." E. W. W., of Virginia, writes: "I found Crown Reliner to be all you claim." Many more attest to same excellent results. Reline your plates with CROWN RELINER today.

SEND NO MONEY

You must be 100% delighted or no cost. Try four months and return for refund if not satisfied.

AT YOUR DRUGGIST OR ORDER DIRECT.

CROWN PLASTIC COMPANY, DEPT. 5008
4358 W. Philadelphia Ave., Detroit 4, Mich.

Send your wonderful Crown Dental Plate Reliner and include the free Crown Cleaner. I will pay postman one dollar plus approximately 24c. postage on arrival. If I am not satisfied after four months, I may return partly used tube for full refund.
(☐ I am enclosing one dollar in payment, same guarantee.)

Name .....

Address .....

RATIONED MOTORISTS

Now Get EXTRA GASOLINE MILEAGE

Now you can get up to 30% extra gasoline mileage with a Vacu-matic on your car. Quicker pick-up, smoother running, added power and precious gasoline savings guaranteed.

Automatic Supercharge Principle

Vacu-matic is *entirely different!* Operates on the Supercharge principle. Saves gas. Automatically provides a better gas mixture. Guaranteed to give up to 30% extra gas mileage, more power and better performance.

FITS ALL CARS
Constructed of six parts, fused into a single unit. Adjusted and *sealed at the factory.* Very quickly installed by anyone.

AGENTS *Get Yours FREE*
Every car, truck, tractor a prospect. Send name, address on postcard for big money-making offer and how, for introducing, you get yours free.

Vacu-matic Co., 7617-951 W. State St., Wauwatosa 13, Wis.

WHAT SHOULD YOU INVENT

Our FREE BOOK tells you what today's inventive market wants—how to put down, patent and sell your ideas. Scores of letters in our files attest to the modern demand for inventions—our long experience as Registered Patent Attorneys will help you. Get our FREE book, "How to Protect, Finance and Sell Your Invention." Also special document free, "Invention Record" on which to sketch and describe your invention. Write today. No obligation.

McMORROW & BERMAN, Patent Attorneys
1294 Albee Building, Washington 5, D. C.

STOP TOBACCO?

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have. Make yourself free and happy with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men.

30 Years in Business

FREE BOOK

THE NEWELL COMPANY
600 Clayton Sta., St. Louis, Mo.

JOKE BOOKS FOR ADULTS

The kind they like. You will be both a Riot and the Life of the Party with a set of these pocket size joke books. They are full of Entertainment, Fun and Humor. A set of six books only 50¢ or a special assortment of 12 books all different for $1.00. Print name and address, send cash or stamps to:

TREASURE NOVELTY CO.
72-5th Ave., Dept. 3408, N. Y. 11, N. Y.

"Facts about EPILEPSY"

This most interesting and helpful Booklet will be mailed to anyone while the supply lasts. I will send a free copy to anyone who writes for it.

C. M. SIMPSON
Address Dept. F-27, 1840 W. 44th Street, Cleveland, Ohio

LAW

STUDY AT HOME for Personal Success and Larger Earnings. 35 years expert instruction — over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All text material furnished. Easy payment plan. Send for FREE BOOK—"Law and Executive Guidance," NOW!

AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 44-N, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

Well it seems that during the past several years some of the "wise boys" have been trying to gather in all single shot actions that are strong enough to stand pressures developed by modern powders in modern cartridges. So said actions are getting hard to find especially for just a few bucks. Four or five years ago it was no trouble at all to buy a good single-shot action (Winchester, Stevens 44½, Remington-Hepburn, or Sharps Borchardt) for five simolians or less.

I couldn't find anything I considered suitable for the job and was on the point of using an old Remington Rolling Block action which I knew wouldn't work out so very well. This particular action had been barreled and chambered for the 7 mm. cartridge, so I figured it was strong enough for the new cartridge which was one of the smaller .22 caliber wildcats.

This rolling block outfit might have been interesting to experiment with—but about this time I heard of an auction where a number of guns were going to be sold so I decided to wait.

To make a long story short, I bought a Remington-Hepburn rifle which looked good in the auctioneer's hands — at least from where I sat in the audience it looked good. By the time the sale was over I had convinced myself that I had surely bought a piece of junk, and was in about the same frame of mind as the Irishman who wanted to borrow his friend's sled (if you remember that story.)

Anyway I put down my money and lugged the newly acquired rifle home. It didn't look so bad and after being wiped off with an oily rag it looked pretty good. I had previously decided after a casual look at the muzzle that it was chambered for the .38-55 or .38-56 cartridge—but was somewhat surprised when I noticed .38-50 stamped on the under side of the barrel just forward of the forearm.

I lowered the breechblock and took a peep through the bore. It didn't look so hot! There were apparently large patches of rust, under which there would undoubtedly be deep pits. Well, I didn't care as I wanted to put a new barrel on anyway.

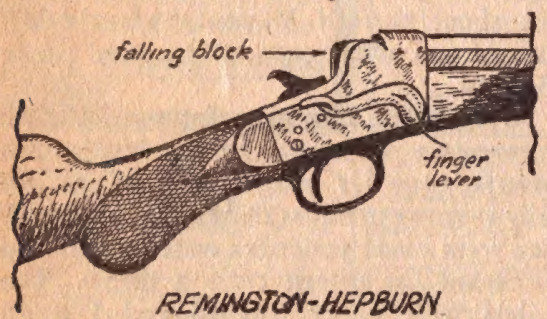
The block was good and tight and seemed to be in excellent condition, so what the heck!

Perhaps it would be a good idea to interrupt here and say a few words about the Remington-Hepburn action.

It was patented October 7, 1879 by Lewis Hepburn, and was more or less popular until discontinued in 1907.

This action had two strikes on it from the very beginning, as did most single shot guns, for the majority of shooters were hot for repeaters. And besides this it was operated by a side lever instead of the under lever as seen on Sharps, Ballard, Winchester, Peabody, Maynard and most other early American single-shot arms.

However it was liked by many riflemen for its solid trigger guard integral with the floor plate. And another point, when worn loose the lever didn't have to be held during the trigger squeeze as so often happened with the under lever single shot gun. Also this lever didn't project below the trigger guard thus making it easy to handle in the prone position.



REMINGTON-HEPBURN

On all Remington-Hepburn guns I have owned, the short vertically rising and falling breechblock has fitted with remarkable tightness and all parts have been nicely made of splendid materials. I also always like the simplicity of design of this action. For instance, there is no link to couple the finger lever with the falling block so to clean or examine said block it is a simple matter to loosen one screw and out it pops!

The firing pin is positioned in the block so that it strikes the primer at a 30-degree angle, and it is retracted by a small encircling spring, and it is not supported against the primer by the hammer which automatically rebounds into the safety position. Although this is not the best firing-pin and hammer design it works out very well, with only an occasional fired primer protruding into the firing pin hole—making it necessary to snap the hammer again before lower-

FREE Lesson in RADIO

GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH RECEIVER SERVICING

PARTIAL LIST OF SUBJECTS

- How a superheterodyne circuit works
- How to remove tubes, tube shields
- Three reasons why Radio tubes fail
- Electrodynamic loudspeaker
- Output transformer repair
- Gang tuning condenser
- I.F. transformers—What they do, repair hints
- How to locate defective soldered joints
- Inside story of carbon resistors
- Paper, electrolytic, mica, trimmer condensers
- Antenna, oscillator coil facts
- Power transformer: construction, possible troubles
- Installing power cord
- Tone controls
- Dial Lamp connections
- Receiver servicing technique: Checking performance Testing tubes Circuit disturbance test
- Isolating defective stage
- Locating defective part

See For Yourself How I Train You at Home to Be a RADIO Technician

I will send you a FREE Lesson to show how I train beginners at home in spare time. And with it I'll send my 64-page book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." It tells how you get PRACTICAL experience building real Radio Circuits with SIX BIG KITS of Radio parts I send!

More Radio Technicians Now Make $50 a Week Than Ever Before

There's a real shortage of trained Radio Technicians and Operators. The Radio Repair business is booming because no new Radios have been made since early in 1942. Broadcasting Stations, Aviation and Police Radio are scrambling for trained Radio men. And think of the NEW jobs coming in Television, Electronics, Frequency Modulation.

Many Beginners Make $5, $10 a Week EXTRA in Spare Time

There's probably an opportunity right in your neighborhood to make money in spare time fixing Radios. I'll give you the training that started hundreds of N.R.I. students making $5, $10 a week EXTRA while still learning.

Get my FREE Lesson and 64-page book. They show how N.R.I. trains you at home, describe fascinating jobs Radio offers. Just mail Coupon in envelope or paste on penny postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 4HM, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

Television
Electronics
Frequency Modulation

My up-to-date Course includes training in these new developments.

I TRAINED THESE MEN

Chief Operator Broadcasting Station. "Before I completed your lessons, I joined Station WMPC where I am now Chief Operator." HOLLIS F. HAYES, 327 Madison St., Lapeer, Mich.

$10 a Week EXTRA in Spare Time. "I repaired some Radios when I was on my tenth lesson. I have made an average of $10 a week—just spare time." JOHN JERRY, 1337 Kalamath St., Denver, Colo.

Radio Service Manager. "I am now Radio Service Manager for M - - - Furniture Co.'s 4 stores." JAMES E. RYAN, 119 Pebble St., Fall River, Mass.

GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK SAMPLE LESSON **FREE**

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 4HM,
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me FREE, without obligation, your Sample Lesson, "Getting Acquainted With Radio Receiver Servicing" and 64-page book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." (No salesman will call. Write plainly.)

AGE.....

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE.....4FR

AMAZE
your friends
E-Z MAGIC
with
MAGIC
10 TRICKS
AMAZING! MYSTIFYING!
COMPLETE APPARATUS and INSTRUCTIONS
Full EQUIPMENT for
10 HAIR-RAISING TRICKS

ONLY $2.00 Postpaid
ACTUAL $5.00 VALUE!

MYSTIFY friends! Gain more popularity than you ever dreamed possible. It's easy with this magic outfit of 10 hair-raising tricks. Furnished with all the secret equipment and easy-to-understand explanations. Your friends will gasp with astonishment when before their very eyes you make things disappear and reappear . . . yes, you will perform in expert manner. The tricks we send you are similar to those used by many professional magicians. You too will laugh and be astonished because you will know how easy these tricks are to do. You will do them perfectly with almost no practice. Read on and learn all that is included with this offer, that is as amazing as the tricks themselves.

YOU GET EQUIPMENT FOR ALL THESE 10 TRICKS FOR ONLY $2.00

1. MAGIC FRAME—An amazing trick! Any card selected by a spectator is instantly made to appear in the Magic Frame, replacing a card previously in frame.
2. CHAN'S LAUNDRY TICKET—A strip of paper with Chinese characters is torn into small pieces, then restored! A spectacular trick! Five tickets included. You can make your own after you know the secret!
3. YOGI BEADS—Three colored wooden beads on a string are held at both ends of string by spectator. Magician instantly removes all the beads, which may be examined. A smart trick! No skill required!
4. MAGIC RULER—A 5-inch ruler with hole in center, is inserted in a fancy slotted cover between the covers. A metal fastener locks ruler between covers, but the magician removes the ruler promptly. Solid through solid effect! Ruler and cover, also fastener, may be examined. Astonishing!
5. E-Z MONEY VANISHER—Coins, bills, small articles appear or disappear with this clever device. No skill required. Change a penny into a dollar and vice versa.
6. FOOLED AGAIN—A comedy card trick that fools all! One red and two black cards are shown. The red card suddenly disappears and is found in the magician's pocket or under the rug, etc. The original red card changes to a card reading "Fooled" on one side and "Fooled Again" on other side.
7. RED DEVILS—Three red discs are thrown on table by magician. One of the dice is placed in his pocket with right hand and the other two picked up in his left. Yet, when his left hand is opened, it contains THREE DICE. Can be repeated!
8. MYSTIC TAGS—Three tags, colored red, white and blue, are given to spectator, also a string. Spectator is asked to thread tags through top holes, and hold both ends of string. Magician removes center white tag without tearing it. A great stunt!
9. MAGIC RATTLE BARS—Three bars are shown. One rattles, two don't. They are mixed around and spectator is asked to tell which rattles, but ALWAYS fails! This trick alone usually sells for $1.00. It's a honey!
10. AGAINST GRAVITY!—A handkerchief is spread over a board and then two ordinary borrowed drinking glasses placed upon it. Magician turns the board upside down but glasses do not drop. One glass may be removed but other still remains in position. A most mystifying trick but E-Z to do with our secret apparatus.

FREE—THIS BOOK
OF 102 MAGIC TRICKS WITH ORDER FOR OUR TEN TRICKS

Order at once and receive free our Magic book containing $1,000.00 worth of magical secrets. 102 startling tricks you learn quickly. Do tricks with cards, coins, watches, cigarettes, mind-reading, etc. . . . all without apparatus.
HOW TO ORDER. Send us your name and address. Enclose $2.00, money order or cash. (If cash, use registered mail.) Foreign orders $2.50. Receive all that is advertised above in private, sealed package by return prepaid mail. WE DO NOT SHIP C.O.D. Act Fast!
D. ROBBINS & CO., Dept. N-8, 152 W. 42d St., New York 18, N. Y.

ing the block to extract the cartridge case. Incidentally, the hammer travels but .6" which "makes for" quite a "speed action," this is very desirable for accurate shooting.

These guns were made with either a straight or a pistol grip and I have never seen a Hepburn with a bad trigger pull.

Other points of interest are, powerful extraction, excellent gas disposition (in case of a pierced primer) or a ruptured case the gas can only go upward, and the receiver ring holds a threaded barrel shank .97" in diameter, enabling it to carry barrels heavy enough to hold any cartridge the firing-pin combination can safely handle.

Interruption over, now let's get back to my .38-50 caliber Remington-Hepburn rifle. I had never owned a gun in this caliber before and the more I thought it over the more I wanted to shoot it. So out came the cleaning rod, some patches and a bottle of solvent. I scrubbed the bore, wiped it clean and took a look. Well, sir, it looked just about perfect! What I had mistaken for rust was nothing more than dried grease and dust.

So I started searching for some .38-50 ammunition, which by the way hasn't been manufactured for many, many moons. Finally twenty cartridges that looked as though they were made yesterday were located and purchased for fifteen cents a throw. The bullets were paper patched and I could hardly wait to get out to the range.

I fired, or rather tried to fire, ten of 'em—six went off with nothing more than a couple of hang fires, while four refused to budge.

At that I got a six shot group which measured 1¾" x ½" horizontal which is pretty good at 65 yards with not so hot ammo.

So, now I'm waiting until we can again get the where-with-all for reloading, at which time I think this old gun will really go to town—before I make her over—to handle a modern cartridge.

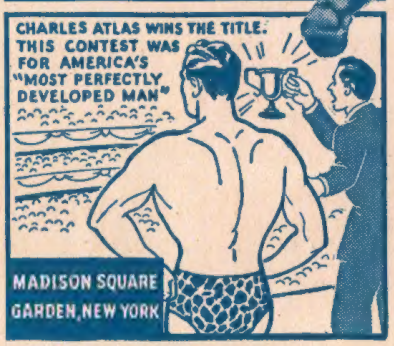
Let's Go for the Knockout Blow!

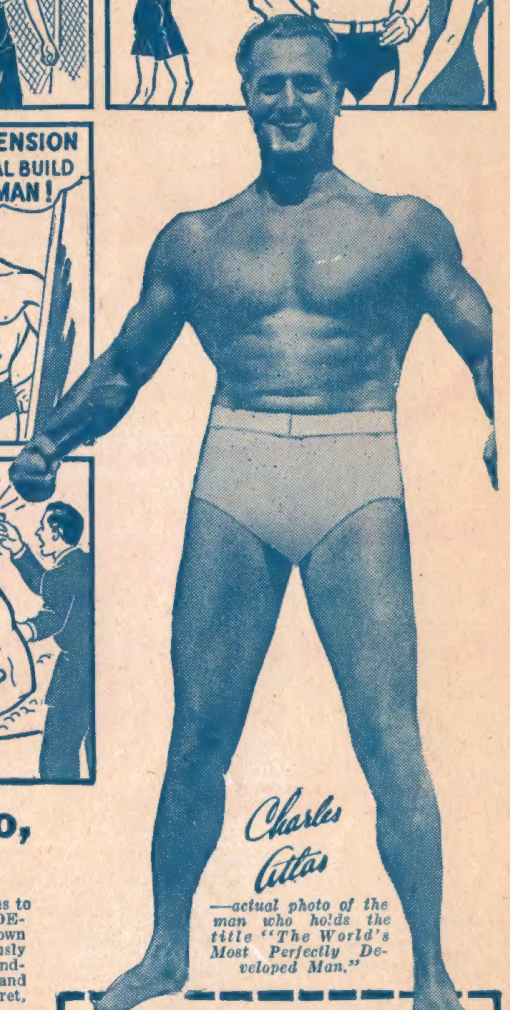
BUY MORE WAR BONDS AND STAMPS EACH DAY

HOW A 97-Lb. WEAKLING Became the "WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED MAN"

The inspiring story of CHARLES ATLAS

SO CHARLES ATLAS SPENT MONTH AFTER MONTH SEARCHING FOR A WAY TO DEVELOP HIS BODY. AND FINALLY HE DISCOVERED HIS AMAZING METHOD--
DYNAMIC TENSION!


CHARLES ATLAS WINS THE TITLE. THIS CONTEST WAS FOR AMERICA'S "MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED MAN"
MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, NEW YORK



Charles Atlas

—actual photo of the man who holds the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

I Can Make You a New Man, Too, In Only 15 Minutes a Day!

If you're the way I USED to be—if you are skinny and feel only half-alive—if the better jobs pass you by—if you're in the service, but are being "pushed around"—if you're ashamed to strip for sports or a swim—and if you want a HE-MAN's body—then give me just 15 minutes a day!

I'll PROVE you can have a build you'll be PROUD of; *"Dynamic Tension"* will do it for *you*, too! *That's* how I changed my own build into such perfect proportions that famous sculptors and artists have paid me to pose for them. My body won me the title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now I can give you solid, beautiful, USEFUL muscle wherever YOU want it!

"DYNAMIC TENSION" Does It

In only 15 minutes a day, *"Dynamic Tension"* can bulge up your chest, broaden your back, fill out your arms and legs. Before you know it, this easy, NATURAL method will make you a New Man! In fact, I GUARANTEE you'll start seeing results in the first 7 days!

I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. You simply utilize the UNDEVELOPED muscle-power in your own God-given body—almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY. And it's so easy—my secret, *"Dynamic Tension,"* does the trick!

FREE BOOK

Thousands of fellows in every branch of the service as well as civilians have used my *"Dynamic Tension"* to change themselves into real HE-MEN! Read what they say—see how they looked before and after—in my book—*free*. Tells all about *"Dynamic Tension,"* shows actual photos of men I've turned from puny weaklings into Atlas Champions. And I can do the same for YOU. Mail the coupon *now!* Address me personally: CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9H, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9H,
115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y

I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a new man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State.....

☐ Check here if under 16 for Booklet A

Buy War Savings Bonds and Stamps Regularly.

AMAZING **NEW**

GOLD SEAL POLICY

COSTS LESS THAN $1 a month

PAYS accumulated **ACCIDENT BENEFITS** for Accidental Loss of Life, Limb, or Sight up to $6000.00

For LOSS OF TIME! Accident Disability Benefits up to $100 a month for as long as 24 months, or $2400.00

SICKNESS BENEFITS For Loss of Time due to Sickness, a maximum Monthly Income of . . . . . $100.00 PER MO.

HOSPITAL EXPENSES for Sickness or Accident, including $5.00 a day for hospital room, up to $650.00

DON'T TAKE CHANCES! . . . Accidents happen to 20 persons every minute of every day; and sickness strikes when least expected . . . bringing doctor bills, hospital bills, loss of income and pressing demands for cash, all at the same time. Why take chances? Why delay another single day? NOW you can enjoy the ALL AROUND insurance protection you need and should have at a price anyone can afford . . . just $1 a month.

CASH BENEFITS THAT ARE BIG ENOUGH TO BE WORTHWHILE! This is no "penny ante" policy. It's benefits are big enough to do some good! Policy pays on **ALL accidents, ALL common sicknesses,** even for minor injuries; all according to liberal terms of the policy. Disability benefits start the very first day, no waiting period.

ACT TODAY! TOMORROW MAY BE TOO LATE!

NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION required! No red tape! Policy issued BY MAIL at BIG SAVINGS. Ages 15 to 69. Actual Policy sent for 10 Days' FREE Examination. ACT NOW! Write for it today. No cost. No obligation. No salesman will call. Use coupon below. Do it today!

FREE 10-Day Inspection Coupon

THE SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
450-C Service Life Bldg. Omaha, Nebr.

Without cost or obligation, send your GOLD SEAL $1-A-MONTH Policy for 10 DAYS' FREE INSPECTION.

Name _____

Address _____ Age _____

City _____ State _____

Beneficiary _____